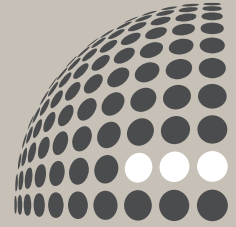


SETA Policy Debate



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Turkish-Israeli Relations and Regional Dynamics after the Palmer Report



| steven cook | erol cebeci | daniel levy | kadir ustun |



ABSTRACT

Following the leak of the Palmer Report to the New York Times, Turkey declared that it considered the report null and reduced its diplomatic relations with Israel to the second Secretary level. The Palmer panel was meant to mend ties between Turkey and Israel but it failed to do so. What will be the regional impact of the worsening relations between the two countries? In the wake of the Arab Spring, how might the Turkish-Israeli fallout affect the political future of the Middle East?

This Policy Debate is based on a panel discussion on "Turkish-Israeli Relations and Regional Dynamics after the Palmer Report" organized by the SETA Foundation at Washington D.C. on September 19, 2011. The panelists included Daniel Levy of the New America Foundation, Steven A. Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations and Erol Cebeci of SETA D.C. and the discussion was moderated by Kadir Ustun of SETA D.C.



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TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS AFTER THE PALMER REPORT

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Event Date: Monday, September 19, 2011

Policy Debate Series

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Policy Debate Series Editors: Kadir Üstün and Kılıç Buğra Kanat

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TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS AFTER THE PALMER REPORT

Kadir Ustun:

Following the leak of the Palmer Report to the New York Times, Turkey declared that it considered the report null and reduced its diplomatic relations with Israel to the second secretary level. The Palmer Panel was meant to mend ties between Turkey and Israel but obviously it failed to do so. So what will be the impact of the worsening regional relations between the two countries and how could this fallout affect the Middle East broadly and, of course, bilateral relations?

We have Daniel Levy, a senior fellow and co-director of the Middle East Task Force at the New America Foundation. He's also a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and serves as a co-editor of Foreign Policy Magazine's Middle East Channel. Steven A. Cook, the Hasib J. Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, is an expert on Arab and Turkish politics as well as US Middle East policy and the author of *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* and *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*. Our executive director, Erol Cebeci, just finished serving in the Turkish Parliament as a Parliament member of the AK Party for two terms. Prior to that he spent 16 years in the US and he has taught undergraduate courses on economics and finance. He established and ran private companies in business and consulting on international trade. He served as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, first as a member then as the chairman of the Turkish delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly in the Council of Europe. He has worked on human rights issues, security and defense issues, foreign policy and European politics.

Steven Cook:

This issue has received a tremendous amount of press in the last couple of weeks, first, of course, with the leak of the Palmer Report and then Prime Minister Erdoğan's tour of

Steven Cook:
What Sir Geoffrey Palmer and his colleagues did, though, was engage in some interesting legal reasoning in order to get to the fact that the blockade is legitimate and Israel's right to defend it is perfectly within the limits of the law.

the Middle East and the upcoming UN General Assembly meeting. Let me just quickly talk a bit about the Palmer Report and my view of it, then US policy and where we're likely to go. First, it's clear that most of the people who have commented on the Palmer Report have actually not read it. It essentially confirms Israel's overarching legal argument in regard to its naval blockade and its right to enforce that naval blockade. What Sir Geoffrey Palmer and his colleagues did, though, was engage in some interesting legal reasoning in order to get to the fact that the blockade is legitimate and Israel's right to defend it is perfectly within the limits of the law. The way they did that was say that the naval blockade was a separate policy from the closure of the land borders. They focused on the fact that the land closure was instituted in 2007 and that the naval blockade was instituted in January 2009, and, as a result, determined that these were actually separate policies.

That may seem convincing from a legal perspective but from a political perspective it is not at all so. It seems that the naval blockade was part and parcel of a ratcheting up and change to an existing policy. Nevertheless, 'what's done is done,' which was the conclusion of the Palmer Report. It also, interestingly, in ten pages absolutely eviscerated the Turkish narrative, not necessarily of its legal reasoning but the justifications for and intentions of the IHH and other actors attempting to break Israel's blockade. In that environment, it is clear why the Turkish government reacted the way it did, and in many respects the reason why the Turkish government reacted the way it did was for largely domestic political purposes. In essence, the government that demanded this UN inquiry was so confident in its legal reasoning and so confident in its justifications that for Sir Geoffrey Palmer and his colleagues to come out and totally reject their reasoning and need, even though Prime Minister Erdoğan is the master of his political domain, there was a need to change the subject.

This is not, however, the reason why the Turks downgraded their relations with Israel. This was a proximate cause, something that was used as an excuse to do it, but we were traveling down this road from the very beginning. The very beginning may or may not have been the flotilla incident, but once the flotilla incident happened, we were essentially moving toward this point for a variety of important structural and political reasons. The political reasons are abundantly clear, that Prime Minister Erdoğan and his party enjoy a certain amount of domestic political benefit from opposing Israel. There is no secret and nothing controversial to suggest that the strategic relationship between Israel and Turkey was for the benefit of both countries but only supported by a very small segment of the population, and most of those people were in uniform. To the extent that the Justice and Development Party wanted to alter its relations with the Arab world, it was necessarily going to have to change its relationship with Israel. The Turks clearly see economic and political opportunity in better relations with the Arab world. Thus, the relationship with Israel had to change. There were, of course, a number of unfortunate incidents that precipitated what many are calling a 'crisis' in the relation-

ship, but what, I think, is the logical conclusion of what everyone's present politics are and what the world around us looks like, giving people the incentive to change the relationship and constraints, importantly, for the United States to try to patch up the relationship.

US efforts over the course of the last fifteen months have essentially been a fool's errand for these reasons that I suggest: both the Turkish and Israeli governments have an interest in posturing the way they have towards each other for their own domestic political purposes; in addition, the Turkish government doesn't need anything from Israel; Turkey is strategically important to the United States, it is an economically successful country and it is poised to play a leadership role in its region. The rationale for tight strategic relations between Israel and Turkey, from the perspective of Ankara, is outdated, outmoded and no longer relevant. Israel perhaps needs Turkey more than Turkey needs Israel, but really only in a symbolic way. To say that Israel has good relations with a large, predominantly Muslim country in the region is obviously of diplomatic benefit for Israel, but, in a material sense, does it mean all that much? The suggestion that, because there has been this downgrade in relations between Israel and Turkey due to Israel becoming far more isolated, is an exaggeration of the situation. It is only really in the last two decades that Israel has broken out of its diplomatic isolation, and it managed fairly well prior to those two decades. So in a material sense, in a diplomatic sense, in a military sense, this is a relationship that, although symbolically important to the Israelis, is really no longer important.

I think that we, the United States, failed to perceive the political realities in either Jerusalem or Ankara, and as a result we went down this garden path of trying to patch up relations between the two countries. Where we now find ourselves is in an awkward diplomatic situation. There is now a letter from members of Congress to the President, making certain demands of the President in his meeting tomorrow with Prime Minister Erdoğan, specifically in regard to sharing data with Israel from the radar installation that would be in Turkish territory, but I think the administration, quite rightly, is focusing on the larger issues here and the larger strategic issues as opposed to continuing to involve itself in what is essentially a spat between Israel and Turkey. What it amounts to is that Washington will step in, and instead of data being transmitted directly from Turkey to Israel, the United States will transfer that data itself. Unfortunately, the United States is going to have to spend naval resources essentially playing referee in the eastern Mediterranean.

It was ill-chosen words on the part of the foreign minister to suggest, to implicitly threaten, that Turkey will defend freedom of navigation in the eastern Mediterranean, essentially setting up the possibility of some sort of naval incident. We are now in the situation in which the US will essentially have to referee, to wear stripes in the eastern Mediterranean to the extent that irresponsible people are going to continue to try to break the flotilla and that there are irresponsible people in positions of power,

Steven Cook:
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or close to power, in both countries and the politics dictate it. We are going to have to deconflict the Israeli and Turkish navies in the eastern Mediterranean. That seems like an extraordinary statement given where we were in the mid-1990s, during which the United States, Israel and Turkey were conducting joint naval operations in the eastern Mediterranean, but it is a function of the fact that we live in a very, very different world than we did in the mid-1990s. The new Middle East is not a Middle East in which Israel is leading the region, or perhaps a situation in which Turkey is leading the region.

Erol Cebeci:
The decision of the Israeli government not to respond positively was not a quick decision and between the flotilla incident and when the Turkish government until the beginning of September made these requests there are fifteen months.

Erol Cebeci:

Right from the beginning after the flotilla incident, the Turkish government's demands from the Israeli government were very clear. They requested a formal apology, compensation for the families of victims, and that the blockade be lifted from Gaza. The decision of the Israeli government not to respond positively was not a quick decision and between the flotilla incident and when the Turkish government until the beginning of September made these requests there are fifteen months. So what we know in this period of fifteen months there were meetings between the Turkish and Israeli governments, and these were rather high-level meetings. What we know now is that there were four rounds of meetings between these delegations and texts were agreed upon which accommodated the Turkish claims of apology and compensation. Especially the meeting held in Geneva in September 2010, after the forest fire incident in Israel, there was an agreement which was taken back to Israel and we were told that due to a disagreement within the Israeli cabinet, it could not be adopted.

So given that there was enough time to negotiate and there were some statements back and forth, we can say that Israeli government didn't refuse Turkey's requests from the beginning. After deliberations, the Israeli government decided that it could not be done and they asked for another extension for the presentation of the report to the UN Secretary General and the public. This was another six-month extension, the Turkish government rejected this, and when the Americans were asking for another month extension, someone leaked the report to the press.

Since both governments had enough time to have come to this conclusion, what we can safely assume that there were calculations on both sides as to what to do if that happens and how to behave. So these are not quick decisions for either side. Since the report was prepared well beforehand and was ready to be published, although it was delayed, for both sides the report, its conclusions and content did not have much of an effect because both the Israelis and Turks knew the content of the report. In the end, the Turkish government came out and said that its demands were not met and military relations would be suspended. Now they are saying that any necessary means will be used to provide the freedom of navigation in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Middle East has never been a static place; there were always changes, but the last fifteen months, especially the last ten, the Middle East has seen dramatic changes. The

entire neighborhood, the very landscape changed, the governments have changed, the leaders that we have known for years have gone, and in a region of the world that has been known for its volatility and instability, the level of instability has increased, and almost all the power equations that we knew in the region have been rewritten.

Before I discuss the changes in the Middle East, I would like to bring some historical background of the changes that have taken place in Turkey, and what is different now that was not there in the 1990s. When Israel was created, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize it, and the relationship until the 1980s had its ups and downs but it was without major incident. During the Cold War it was easy to operate; if you are a part of the western alliance, you don't have many question marks in foreign policy. For Turkey, being a full member of NATO and located at the edge of the NATO alliance and the first line of defense against the Soviet Republic, under those circumstances, foreign policy decisions were based mainly on security issues.

The security issues in the country were the main objective, and almost all the international decisions were based on the security of the country, partially because of the Cold War environment and partially because of the unique role the Turkish armed forces has played in the establishment of the republic. The Turkish army has traditionally seen itself as the defender and the guide of the republic, and whenever they felt that the republic was going in a direction that was not proper, they overthrew the government and put the country "back in order." Sometimes, they did that by themselves and sometimes they pressured the government to leave so that a new government could be established.

So during the Cold War era, not only because of the parameters of the Cold War but also because of the Turkish army's position in the system, the army was heavily influential in policy decisions, especially in the field of foreign policy. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, we expected that the environment would be a little safer for Turkey and foreign policy decisions could take into account some other factors along with security concerns. However, by then Turkey had started to deal with terrorism. The PKK was increasing its power and attacks in the 1980s and by the beginning of the 1990s terror was a very real threat for Turkish security. So, after the Cold War, the security needs of the country increased rather than decreased. In addition to this, in the 1990s, weak governments, coalition governments, ran the country and the economics of the country was in very bad shape. There was a very high level of inflation and high levels of domestic and foreign borrowing. Moreover, Turkey was surrounded by countries, which were considered enemies, including Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus.

In the 1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations were at their peak. Even though this relationship was based mainly on security and defense issues, both countries perceived threats, which were similar—radical Islamic movements, Iran, and Syria. Along with these perceived threats, the United States' support for two secular, democratic countries in the

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region brought Turkey and Israel closer to each other. Turkey had access to Israeli technology and Israel had gained an outlet by aligning with Turkey. The relationship was based mainly on military issues, agreements, and cooperation.

Towards the end of the 1990s, domestic dynamics changed in Turkey, Abdullah Öcalan was captured, and the political landscape changed. In 2001, there was a huge economic crisis; in 2002, a new political party came into power. With a strong government and strong leadership, Turkey's tradition of security and neighborhood policy has changed. This was a structural change. Without changing the parameters of being a Western-looking country, without losing any hopes of being a full member of the European Union, Turkey shifted its regional policies. Turkey believed in trying to reach a regional peace and stability and it aimed to provide its own security through this new regional order.

This understanding of regional stability and security required a couple of things—firstly, full engagement with all of the countries in the region, and secondly, some sort of political integration of the region, common goals toward rule of law and human rights, free movement of people and ideas, and economic integration—free movement of goods, increased trade creating common economic interests. In the last nine years, if you look back at Turkish policies, then you will see the same approach in the Middle East and North Africa, and even in the policies towards the southern Caucasus and Balkans. It is basically trying to achieve economic and social integration that would, in the long run, spill over to the political realm and, if possible, create a smooth and gradual political and economic opening that builds the peace and stability in the region. Turkey wanted to first solve all its problems with its neighbors, and second to help the peaceful resolution of the ethnic, religious, sectarian and territorial conflicts.

You can see this engagement in the 2004 UN plan in Cyprus, in the involvement of Turkey in Syrian-Israeli indirect negotiations and in the engagement of Turkey with issues in Iraq, Lebanon, Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. In almost every Turkish foreign policy step you will see the same approach, and this is not just outside, also domestically Turkey has also applied a very similar approach through what are called openings, which focus on solving the Kurdish problem, issues with religious minorities and women. Turkey wants to change the politics of the region, but basically there was one country that was resisting this change, and that was Israel. Even during the first 4-5 years, the relationship between Israel and Turkey was almost intact until 2006 or 2007. The first thing that came out was the crisis after the Israeli-Syrian indirect negotiations, then came Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. But, in fact, the difference in the regional policies is structural in the sense that Turkey looks at regional policy, whereas Israel insists on its own security.

Daniel Levy:

I want to put this in the context of what I understand to be Israel's strategic regional options, in particular in the new regional context. What I want to say about the Palmer

Report is simply this – I think there was a degree of naïveté and misreading of the Israeli political tea leaves on the part of the Turks and the Americans to go this route. The Palmer Report was about creating a backdrop to overcome the flotilla incident in terms of Israeli-Turkish relations. Look at the composition—it’s fascinating because, very often, Israel is hypercritical of UN committees, and sometimes with reason and sometimes with less, of the persons who staff them, and I find it fascinating that Turkey agreed to a committee that consisted of very few people. Within that very small committee, however, was the former Colombian leader Uribe, and who is Uribe? Uribe is the person under whose leadership Colombia’s number one military sales comes from Israel, and Colombia under him aligned itself with the global war on terror, together with Bush and Israel in the early 2000s. When Uribe sees the IHH, he sees FARC. We knew where the Palmer Report was going, that’s what it was designed to do. It was designed to come up with a decision that would give a degree of justification to a certain Israeli policy and in so doing, would create an opening for Israel to say ‘Aha! We’re vindicated on this so we can be large on that.’ It is a very transparently political effort that grew even more transparent when we kept having these delays in publishing the report.

The Palmer Report had done its work, so why on earth should the UN as a body delay issuing a report? It was delaying issuing a report because the political deal that the Palmer Commission was established in order to bring into being wasn’t there, and my argument would be that there was a degree of naïveté on the part of the Turkish leadership and on the part of Washington, that they hadn’t lined their ducks up in a row when it came to Jerusalem. There has been a consistency, not exclusively, but a consistency of Israeli positioning under the Netanyahu/Lieberman government, which is that Netanyahu does not risk losing his right wing political base or his right wing coalition. There’s a very detailed piece by Nahum Barnea in which Nahum goes through what happened on the committee, what was the deal that was reached, what was the apology that was supposed to be made, how Joseph Ciechanover, the Israeli representative on the Palmer Committee, had undertaken the negotiations and then Mr. Netanyahu last-minute decides he’s not going for it.

We keep getting delays but, ultimately, Netanyahu makes his decision, and the decision is driven by the internal coalition within his cabinet that, time and again, when Netanyahu has sat in the Prime Minister’s seat and said ‘it seems as PM that I have to do x’ but also he’s decided he has to do y, because the Israeli coalition, cabinet, and public politics drove him in that direction. He does not want Lieberman to too effectively out-flank him to the right, likewise with people inside the Likud. The real challenge Netanyahu feels he faces is by a minister in his government, Moshe ‘Bogie’ Ya’alon, the former Chief of Staff, and so that is where he positions himself.

That’s my view on the Palmer Report; I do not see it as too much more to read into. Another thing I’d say is to slightly disagree with Steve on the significance of the loss of the Turkey relationship. If one looks back in history at how Israel has tried to manage its

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regional posture, we have basically been through two phases. The first is the 'coalition of the periphery' where Israel did not have relations with anyone of the Arab world but helped to manage its regional strategic posture by working with the non-Arab states in the region—Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia to a certain degree. Of course, the Iran option collapses, the Turkey option does not only stay strong but grows stronger, but then a new option opens up for Israel both with the signing of the Peace Treaty with Egypt but then when the Oslo Peace Process comes along, you have what was somewhat mistakenly called this notion of alliances of the moderates against the extremists.

Who were the moderates? Mubarak's Egypt, some of the Gulf with whom we had quiet but not public relationships with Israel. What we see is the collapse of that right now, not that it is impossible for Israel to maintain relations with the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) or quietly with some in the Gulf. In fact, Israel and the conservative Gulf regimes have pretty much been talking from the same song sheet during the Arab Spring, but there's not going to be a public embrace there. Israel now finds itself without a regional strategy and the loss of Turkey is quite a devastating development in that respect, especially since the flailing efforts to respond to the loss of Turkey have taken Israel under Netanyahu/Lieberman into the realm of what could only be, somewhat mockingly, referred to as a 'coalition of the super-periphery.' So Israel thinks they can build relations with the Greeks, and the foreign minister openly talks about this, apparently without cracking a smile, that Israel can start developing relations with the Balkan countries, with the Greeks, and this will substitute Turkey. Then he talks about making common accords with the PKK and with Kurdish causes and perhaps with Southern Sudan now, but I don't think that's an outer ring that's going to stand Israel in very good stead.

Under the AK Party, things did go through a period under the Olmert government in which Turkey played a very unusual role. It's a very unusual situation in which the Americans aren't willing to play a mediating role; the Bush administration was more Catholic than the Pope on Israel not talking to the Syrians. Israel decides nonetheless that it's in Israel's national interest to be a little less Catholic to talk to the Syrians, and there's Turkey—the Turkey of Erdoğan. Davutoğlu at the time is a close advisor, not yet the foreign minister, Turkey is under AK Party leadership, which Olmert entrusts with managing very sensitive negotiations. We're familiar with the story of the phone calls and the meetings between the leaders' offices.

It's too simple, however, to say that this is an AK Party thing. We haven't really discussed it, but there's also criticism from within Turkey, from the right, on Turkey not being tough enough. When post-Cast Lead (after the Gaza operation) then FM Babacan meets with Livni, both are then foreign ministers, the AK Party gets attacked domestically inside Turkey for going too soft on Israel and for holding that meeting. On both sides there has been an ability to manage this relationship under certain political circumstances. But I think here is where politics and ideology came together in a very unhelpful way

under the Netanyahu government, and then an extra level was added on when the Arab Spring comes along and leads the Turkish government to recalibrate a little bit its relations, to see that they could cede even less ground in terms of the patience willing to be displayed with the Netanyahu/Lieberman government and to draw down on that a little bit.

First about Netanyahu - in his first term in office when he was Prime Minister in the late 1990s, loses his right wing. In his second term in office he has come into government with at least one lesson he has taken from his experience in the late '90s— "do not lose your right wing." They are capable of doing the Masada thing and sacrificing him in going to elections, bringing him down even if that means bringing them down, and he does not want to create that. And the second thing, ideologically and possibly subconsciously, is not to allow a Turkish model for Israel's relations to be possible. When I say Turkish model in this context I mean the following: the option was available for Israel to have not simple but more stable relations with Turkey. A part of the equation would be that, while having the bilateral relationship and while both having the relationship with the US, Turkey would also be critical of Israel and Turkey would step out and not hold back in terms of criticizing Israel's policies toward the Palestinians in ways that are uncomfortable for Israel. Israelis are not used to that. I think many of the autocratic Arab regimes were able to police the parameters of public criticism against Israel.

I think that there was a decision made to not allow this to become a model, where you can be critical but friendly; seriously critical, but continue working relations from Israel. Shlomo Brom at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel and the former deputy head of national strategy in the IDF wrote recently about a tendency in Israel's government "we can see foreign relations as having only two shades—black and white. Either a state is friendly toward Israel and willing to accept anything we do, including our mischief, or it is an enemy, anti-Semitic and a member of the axis of evil. Rarely do we assume that the explanation may be a bit more complicated, or search for a real reason for the government's behavior." Not allowing that sophistication was a conscious decision. If I'm going to look on the bright side, I think I would say that on both sides public opinion is being led by rather than leading elite people. In other words, I do not think Israel's position is being led by public opinion, I do not think there is a public demand, I think it is a useful tool for politicians to play.

Obviously, there's another factor which is the way in which the former ambassador to the US, Danny Ayalon, managed Israel's standing on the diplomatic stage, and what was done with the Turkish ambassador was perhaps a high point for them of course. In terms of how they managed Israel's diplomatic relations most people would probably see it as the low point. Where I want to place this is what Israel's strategic options are, and the two basic tendencies in the Israeli debate. These are, with my apologies to the animal kingdom for using this taxonomy, the porcupine strategy and the chameleon strategy, and I'd even suggest there's a caterpillar strategy out there also.

Daniel Levy:
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Daniel Levy:
Netanyahu has clearly gone the porcupine route. The porcupine route is 'Fortress Israel' and the strategy is that Israel turns in on itself.

What do mean by the porcupine versus the chameleon? Netanyahu has clearly gone the porcupine route. The porcupine route is 'Fortress Israel' and the strategy is that Israel turns in on itself. Netanyahu was touring the Egyptian border the other day, promising to speed up the construction of separation barriers/walls on that border, obviously that's something we have with the Palestinians. This is a policy of no retreat, and obviously even the Palmer Report-facilitated soft apology option is not part of the porcupine strategy. Now I actually think that if you are an Israeli government that knows, because you're the government, that regardless of what you say in a Bar-Ilan speech about two states that you have no intention of allowing the creation of a separate Palestinian state and you're not planning anytime soon to start withdrawing from occupation. In fact, you have every intent on entrenching yourself in the territories. I think if that's your predisposition, then porcupine is probably what you come out with; it probably makes the most sense that you have to be the crazy person of the neighborhood. There will be consequences for messing with you and if delivering those consequences comes via Washington, then you deliver those consequences via Washington. I think that's what we're seeing in terms of the Israel-Turkey relationship. There's a more elaborate interpretation of the porcupine strategy, it's predicated partly on arms sales, making yourself as indispensable to emerging powers like China, trying to use your prowess in the arms R&D, development and sales region, et cetera. You, for instance, see the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) as maintaining maximum power as your best possible outcome in Egypt. Personally I think it's unsustainable, bordering on suicidal for Israel, but in terms of a Netanyahu policy toward the Palestinians, it has its own internal logic.

The chameleon strategy is you blend in more, you camouflage yourself in order to be able to adapt to your environment, and in a mixing of metaphors, if Israel has been skating on a thin sheet of ice, then you thicken that ice, and you thicken that ice, and you thicken it, and you don't take a pickaxe to it. So you go with a Palmer formula for an apology, you go with a more credible effort with the Palestinians. It's essentially what the Kadima policy looks like, and, of course, which took place and which kept the Turkey relationship in a certain place, in a certain constructive place when it was the AK Party and Kadima in power. I think Sharon showed elements of the chameleon policy when he withdrew from Gaza; Begin does it in the Sinai peace with Egypt, so this isn't something that only comes from the traditional center-left initiative. It's fascinating that when Israel's major problem now could be with Turkey and Egypt— democratic Turkey and democratizing Egypt. It's fascinating that in both of those countries have, and continue to have relations with Israel even if you haven't gone the whole distance on the Palestinian question. But you have to be a lot more credible. My caterpillar theory, which is the most counterintuitive I will admit and you may agree, and I think it's what will be required if Israel wants to adjust to the new realities of the region, is you demonstrate a maturity of the project of Israel's future by being willing to come to terms with '48, by being able to offer full equality and democracy, and citizenship to

your Palestinian minority inside Israel and by genuinely getting out of the business of occupation and then you become a butterfly and you soar above the regional developments. My worry is, however, how does that play out in Washington? My worry is that's where the political temptation to do things that really become detrimental to the ability to create some kind of an even keel of Israeli-Turkish relations going forward. My fear is that especially some in Congress would like to take that relationship and would like to up the ante and I think probably push the Turkish government into an even more out there position. Here is where that might come from.

Question and Answer Session:

Question:

It would be helpful if you could address the internal Turkish evolution on the subject of some figures in foreign policy. As you know, Israelis have convinced themselves that much of the change in direction is not about national interests. It is about Islamization of the approach in Turkey and in the region, but none of you mentioned that and it seems it is a psychological factor and a debate today.

Question:

I'd like to hear from Mr. Cebeci on Turkish regional strategy. Some of Turkey's bets have failed. Efforts toward relations with Iran don't look very good now, except for the radar. Syria is a huge mess. So, obviously you are trying hard to keep relations with Egypt and with Tunisia, and that's been better but Israel still plays a role in this. Even the recent strategy toward the turmoil in Syria is not going well.

Question:

I am wondering if we can dig a little bit get deeper into the role the United States should be playing, specifically how you would advise the administration, given that they are going to be entrenched in this regardless.

Steven Cook:

Regarding the first question, the Justice and Development Party has created an environment where it is safer for people to express their Islamic identity. I think that the Israelis want to convince themselves that there is an Islamization of Turkish foreign policy. In fact, given the regional opportunities that Turkey faces, any Turkish government would have initially sought to improve relations with Iran, would have sought good relations with Syria, and would have tried to play a larger role. I think that is not a function of what does the Quran tells them to do; I think it is a cold calculation of what

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Steven Cook:
Israeli prime ministers don't have domestic policies or foreign policies, they have coalitions and because of this part in particular I'm not sure if Israel should apologize for that; that is the situation that they are in.

Turkey's strategic interests are in the region. And clearly there is a perceived need for Iranian gas and better relations with the Arab world and using Syria has that weight going into it. Playing a more constructive role in the Arab world is extraordinarily important and was a motivating factor for Turkish foreign policy to the extent to which it is going to cause friction with Israel. The only people who have been able to manage good relations with Israel and good relations with the Arab world are us. Because we are the big boys on the block, we have all the resources and all the power. So Israelis are dismayed, confused, not really understanding what is happening, and they are falling back on this 'Islamization of Turkish policy.'

I think this question is actually spot on. This kind of triumphant tour that began in Cairo got me into a lot of trouble on my tweets about Erdoğan. Erdoğan said some extraordinarily important things when he was in Cairo that had an impact on people, but I also think that the important part of the trip was an effort to mask some of these very serious missteps at the beginning, very serious missteps when it came to Libya, very serious when it came to Syria and continually. We want there to be a narrative of the importance of Turkey and its strategy, that somehow they are strategic geniuses when in fact they made a number of blunders at the outset and that the kind of very splashy effort in part is masking some of these missteps. They were some great souls, outside the Arab League who were protesting Erdoğan about Syria, where he seems to have shielded the Assad regime.

In terms of the world of the United States and the Turkish-Israeli relationship, I think we are beyond that; there is politics in Israel, surprise surprise. Israeli prime ministers don't have domestic policies or foreign policies, they have coalitions and because of this part in particular I'm not sure if Israel should apologize for that; that is the situation that they are in. There's a deeper root to the problem, and that is electoral reform in Israel. There is no political will to do that. There is politics in Turkey as well. There has been an evolution in Turkey; I think this was a myth that a lot of people built up that, but you can no longer call the generals and get what you wanted, and I don't think that will ever be true. I think the fact that there is politics in Israel, there is politics in Turkey and that politicians are deriving benefits from this situation means that our role is necessarily limited in the levers that we can pull to push these two countries together. We have never actually had that kind of leverage over either country. We talk about this relationship between the United States and Turkey as if there were some golden age. The Turks have fought, died with us in Korea, they were early members of NATO and we stood shoulder to shoulder in the southeastern flank of Europe; we can tell each other that but there are a lot of difficulties in this relationship. We can dig and dig as we want and we are going to come up with one thing. For the moment until there is some sort of change that provides a diplomatic opening we are the referees; the US Navy has a new mission. We might as well paint our ships black and white and hand out red and yellow cards.

Erol Cebeci:

For the Islamization of foreign policy—it is the interpretation of what is going on or what has been going on in Turkey to this day. The people who make the decisions and decision processes understand the global politics very well. And in those terms, if any reasonable political party came to power in the 2000s it had to do exactly the same things that the Turkish government had done previously, regardless of their political affiliation or their political position in the political spectrum. Because you cannot survive in such an environment—don't forget a lot of our domestic problems and the Kurdish problem are heavily tied up in the region. And right at the beginning of 2003 there are problems in Iraq and Iran. The whole landscape changed over there. Even if you take the Turks and put the Germans in Turkey to make that decision, or even Mexicans, they would have done the exact same thing. It has nothing to do with Islamization but it is easier to picture it that way and it gets a lot of support.

I wish I could live in a world where we could implement and do everything and have it go the way we planned, but it doesn't happen and it is absolutely right the policies have failed. Turkey has invested for eight year, ten years in Syria, in the Syrian regime, in the Syrian government to affect a change. There was a genuine belief that Assad could be trusted and now I can see the statement of the Prime Minister and the level of disappointment he has. And at that time the Turks were heavily advised by the Bush administration that what they were doing was the wrong thing to do with the Syrians. Even with this huge failure, so to speak, had the Turks had not done that, think about where the people would be standing at this point. Let's assume for one minute that Assad was gone. To whom would it matter the most that Iran loses almost everything in Syria? In Turkey, even that failed policy opens up opportunities that can be used, but if we could go back to the table, what would we have done differently? Even though it did not produce the output that Turkey wanted nor was it to the benefit of everyone, there are still some accumulated assets over there that can be used.

Daniel Levy:

For me more significant than the Islamist nature of AK Party rule in Turkey is the democratic process that Turkey has gone through. I just think it is a no brainer that Arab democracy will be less tolerant of Palestinian disenfranchisement than Arab autocracy was. This is the headache that is being stored up for the United States. Now, in terms of the porcupine strategy it is still a possible strategy and I don't think the people who are going in that direction in Israel are bunch of neophytes. They are also going to choose when they really want to push the envelope with the US or not. The problem is they can't always choose because sometimes Congress is on autopilot and no longer waits for its instructions from Jerusalem to do dumb things by way of demonstrating that it is beating its chest because of its love of Israel. I think that there are people who have,

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not to my liking always but in a sophisticated way, helped to navigate the Israel-US relationship and probably don't always enjoy it when Congress gets too high up on a ladder on the things it does. And I think there are always people in Jerusalem who are going to be pleased with that. The current chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, is probably in a different place to where the balance of opinion inside the Israeli government is, thinking for instance in terms of the punitive response to the Palestinian approach in the United Nations.

I think this is the threat that is in store for that triangular relationship of America, Israel, and rest of the Middle East. The question is how far do you push the envelope? If you are Israel, how far do you want to send a message via Washington, to teach a lesson via Washington to Erdoğan when you know Washington has an awful lot of interests tied up with its relationship with Turkey? Just look at the recent approval by Turkey of the NATO antimissile defense program. It is not a coincidence that the US administration has been on the phone with the Turkish leadership very intensely throughout these nine months of change in the Middle East. There is that saying, "in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king," and I think that applies a little bit. No, I don't think Turkey is the font of all strategic foreign policy genius in terms of the Middle East, but surrounded by the blindness that Turkey was surrounded by, in terms of so many not having a strategy for the Middle East, the AK party in Turkey look pretty smart in comparison.

Question:

I'm puzzled by the most recent Turkish moves in regard to Cyprus, and the threats against Cyprus.

Question:

Could you comment on the upcoming US veto of the Palestinian proposal to the UN Security Council? Opposition is getting weaker; will this make much of a difference?

Question:

We started hearing that the separation was inevitable and then we're told that Israel just had to apologize, and then it was said that Netanyahu didn't make an apology because of his coalition politics, not because he realized it was an inevitable separation.

Kadir Ustun:

I think there is this tension because, as Steve said, there is politics in Israel, there is politics in Turkey. In terms of regional perspectives, how would you conflate or reconcile those two?

Steven Cook:

It's very easy. There's politics in Israel; there's politics in Turkey. Especially a new, democratic, pluralist Turkey makes that change inevitable. I think if you boil it down that it comes down to politics—politics in Israel, politics in Turkey. There is certainly a range of economic, political, and diplomatic interests that have altered its view of the region, but that is only one part of the story that ultimately leads Israel and Turkey in separate directions. A major part of this is that in Turkey, as well as in Israel, important political considerations are at play here. If Netanyahu cannot look weak because he's managing his coalition, there's an inevitability that he's not going to apologize because he doesn't want to look weak. We also know that Turks, like everybody all over the world, vote on pocketbook issues, but they also vote on another issue recently, that's the Palestinian issue. The relationship with Israel was never a popular one. In a more open environment, public opinion matters. Is it any surprise that when Erdoğan goes to Şemdinli, he pounds on the Israelis? Is that a result of some new strategic view? No, it's about saying 'I'm doing well by you economically, and by the way, we know you are sympathetic to the Palestinian issue so let's touch on that too.'

Erol Cebeci:

I would disagree with Steve. I followed the election campaign from April 2010 to June 2011, day-by-day, hour-by-hour, and Erdoğan has not mentioned the Palestinians or Israel more than a handful of times. For a leader who got 50% of the vote only a few months ago, that need is not that dire in terms of strategic interest and regional policy. I would agree that you couldn't find a single politician in the entire world, whether it is for foreign or domestic policy, which would take a step and not care how that would affect their political standing. But is it as important or as motivating as it is said to be? I personally do not believe that. The Israeli government is not reading the developments and the changes in the landscape in the Middle East properly. This is what I would say is a strategic blindness, and this is not usual of Israeli governments. You can have all the PR power, all the economic power, and thank God that Israel as a country has those powers and those muscles, but if you do not add the strategic interests, those powers may not bring you the benefits they are intended to. They can avoid peace negotiations for some time, and other countries would tolerate it and understand, but we cannot do that forever. I don't know any country in the history of mankind or currently that was able to secure and have a sustainable security by building walls around the country because that is an illusion of security. It might save you in the short run, but in the long run this will turn against you in terms of isolation. Regarding military threats toward Cyprus, I wouldn't qualify it that way perhaps, but the thing is there is an area of economic interest around Cyprus that is undecided at this point. For Turks, from what I understand, it is the difference for who has the right to do exploration for natural gas and oil around the island of Cyprus. We need an agreement that is not unilateral and

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the Greek Cypriots dispute that, so that is the reason for the increased tensions in the region.

Daniel Levy:

For the UN veto, the first thing people should be aware of is that this will not happen next week. President Abbas is fully aware of this, which, I think, is why he has chosen the path of least resistance. If you go to the UN Security Council for membership, it will go to a technical committee that's not going to report back the following morning. This is not going to be an uncontroversial thing where everyone agrees 'Fantastic, South Sudan, you're in, number 193.' This will take weeks, perhaps months. The General Assembly you can go to next week, get a vote, get a resolution forward, and then you can go home with something. I think the way this plays out is it continues the erosion of America's ability to be perceived as a consistent, credible, honest broker, an ally one wants to publicly be aligned with in the region. Is there a direct, tangible, causal, strikingly obvious to everyone cause-effect relationship between that vote and something bad immediately happens to America the very next day on this particular president's watch? It doesn't work like that; these things play out, these things are often in the realm of the less immediately perceptible and tangible. I think that's why the situation continues as it does. I think the folks at CENTCOM, the folks at the DOD know it and every CENTCOM commander since 9/11 has had the same position on the way in which Israel-Palestine plays out, how it negatively impacts America's security interests. But if you've got national interests that you can fudge and get along on one side and a political equation on the other side as your advisers are interpreting it to you, it's pretty clear which way you're going to come down.

In addition, the dignity issue at the core of the Arab awakening of course was driven by the domestic absence of representation, representative governance, enfranchisement, the socioeconomic situation, kleptocracies, et cetera. But dignity also applied to foreign policy. It was undignified for Egypt and Egyptians to be an active co-player with Israel in the closure of Gaza, and dignity will play in the foreign policy arena as well and the more Israel chooses to place itself on the wrong side of that by its policies toward the Palestinians, which do resonate. Any child would understand that the Palestinian issue is not going to go away. The Palestinian issue resonates in the region. When you get on the wrong side of that, you get on the wrong side of the dignity question. All this is happening in the context of there being a Palestinian leadership, which has still fundamentally bought into the old model of working with Israel. This is not a post-Arab Spring, assertive, strategic change of direction Palestinian leadership. They are not going to the UN in order to undo Oslo, in order to break out of those shackles. They are going to the UN as a one-off shot of political frustration. If that equation were to change, I think we're in an even more fundamentally different arena and one in which Israel's adaptive capacities will either have to be very keenly honed or this does not bode well.

Daniel Levy:
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