

Chapter 12

Maintaining a Collaborative Environment Between Turkey and Israel on the Issue of Energy Resources: The Crisis Management Role of the United States

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ABSTRACT

The discovery of energy sources in the Eastern Mediterranean region, while providing opportunities, further complicates Turkey-Israeli relationship. If Israel and Turkey can cooperate on energy, they can revitalize their relationship to the extent when the military elites were strong in Turkey and the relationship between two countries was established with the hands of generals. The 2016 Israel-Turkey agreement, which ended years of tension, provides Israel and Turkey with the opportunity to cooperate in energy areas. This collaboration, in turn, could generate the eventual emergence of the new ruling elites that would fill the vacuum created by the decline of the military's role in Turkey. It was the crisis management experience of the US that made the agreement between two countries possible in June 2016. Yet, any normalization process between Israel and Turkey will not be easy. US policy in the Mideast influences Turkey-Israel relations, and Turkey-Israel relations, in turn, affect the future of the Middle East. This obliges the US to bear a tremendous responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

The problems between Turkey and Israel in recent decades have frequently been marked by a lack of mutual trust. The rift in the relations of the two countries dates back to Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in July 2009. Turkey's mistrust stems from the days when Erdoğan was seen as a prominent person that hold a mediatory position in the Middle Eastern affairs. While Erdoğan was trying to arbitrate in the Syrian issue, Israel invaded Gaza Strip in 2009. Israeli-Turkey diplomatic relations had broken down in May 2010 when Israeli naval commandos intercepted the Mavi-Marmara flotilla, a Turkish boat that was attempting to carry aid to Gaza, resulting in the deaths of nine Turkish activists. The escalation of the Mavi Marmara crisis by Turkey was due to politics to a great degree. Otherwise, the risks were easy to predict when the Mavi Marmara flotilla was sent to Gaza. Gaza has always been one of the so-called red lines of Israel regarding the international sea law and its public law. To send the Mavi Marmara on a risky journey was nevertheless a response by Turkey to Israel's prolonged aggressive attitude towards Gaza/Palestine issue. The Mavi Marmara crisis revealed the lack of trust in the Israel-Turkey relationship.

An agreement to start the process of normalization of ties between Israel and Turkey could only be achieved after long negotiations. Turkey stipulated that Israeli officially apologize for the deaths of Turkish nationals, offer compensation to their families and a lifting of the blockade on Gaza. It was only on June 27, 2016 that an agreement between Israeli and Turkey ended years of tension. The agreement included an official Israeli apology to Turkey for the deaths of Turkish nationals, compensation for their families and a softening of the Israeli blockade on Gaza that would allow Turkey to send aid to the Gaza Strip only through Israel. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz has evaluated this 2016 Israeli -Turkey agreement as "opening relations with one of the strongest countries in the Middle East" (Baker, 2017). Yet, this agreement would not have been achieved without the United States (US) experience of crisis management and its capacity to prevent future conflicts. As Steinitz remarked in 2016: "We were in a very negative course with the Turks," and "two or three years ago, some in Israel even thought we might have armed conflict" (Baker, 2017).

Thanks to the June 2010 discovery of hydrocarbon sources in the Eastern Mediterranean's Leviathan region in Israeli territorial waters, Israel moved from being an energy dependent country to being an energy supplier country. The ability to export this natural gas through different pipelines to the Middle East region or to Europe became critical. This need also offered potential to Israel, including the improvement of its relations with neighboring countries – even with those that were not good friends of Israel, namely, Jordan and Turkey. Israel has already signed an energy deal to export to Jordan and talks continue for exporting the natural

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