

Ambassador (ret.) Eli Shaked Press Update

November 4, 2009

Introduction:

I served in the Israeli foreign ministry in diplomatic service for 30 years. After Cairo, I retired to spend my life in a different way, intellectually, teaching, learning. I studied Islam; I studied the Middle East, history, culture, religion. I think an expert on the Middle East will be busy for the rest of his life! There is never a dull moment for the Middle East. So I go on dealing with the Middle East. I keep in touch with the area and I find a lot of satisfaction with the fact that there are so many people who are interested in the Middle East, who are eager to learn about the Middle East. This is a very difficult task to understand the Middle East. It's not that we Israelis don't understand the mentality of the Arabs, we are not talking on the same level, or even the Europeans, the Americans...the Arabs sometimes do not understand themselves, and their counterparts, their people, and they make huge mistakes. I served in Turkey in various periods since 1980, was in Ankara and Istanbul. Since Turkey is part of the Middle East, it was very interesting to look upon the Middle East from the Turkish side with all their long experience in the Middle East, 100s of years of experience.

Briefing:

Turkey is a very important factor in the Middle East by itself; its strategic position makes it very unique, as a bridge between east and west, north and south. Turkey is a factor for those who are calculating the...of the Middle East. Its importance as a bridge for oil and gas from Asia and Europe is growing all the time from the Thespian Sea, from Russia. You cannot avoid Turkey in this respect as in other respects. Turkey today is a country that has developed an attitude, or foreign policy, of becoming a Middle Eastern super power. Some people call it 'neo-Ottomanism'.

Turkey has a religious Islamic cover, umbrella, and a superpower militarily, economically. This has been developed by Ali Babacan who is a professor of political sciences, and he came up with the idea that Turkey should run a multi-dimensional foreign policy in order to establish itself as a super power, zero conflicts with its neighbors, and a peaceful country that is trying to become the mediator in other conflicts in the Middle East. This is a very nice idea, vision, how to do it, this is something different, and here comes some problems that Israel is sometimes paying its price.

Turkey is surrounded by problems, troubles, conflicts. If you look from east to west north to south, everywhere there is a trouble between Turkey and one of its neighbors or between two neighbors of Turkey, such as the unsolved problem of the last 35 years of Cyprus. In 1974, Turkey invaded part of Cyprus and the problem is still there for the last 35 years unsolved, and there is a conflict with Turkey and Greece becomes some remnants of the end of the First World War and the independence of Turkey with Greece. There is a problem between Turkey and Armenia even though there was a dramatic development in this respect, but Turkey has eased its relations with Armenia so Turkey is trapped with its neighbors.

Turkey and Iran, two countries with such a huge difference in their approach to the west, in their ideology, in their tendencies and their ambitions, in their religions, the conflict between Sunni Islam and Shiite Islam is growing and growing all the time. Take a look at one of the prominent examples, the tension between Egypt and Iran: Egypt, which is alongside Saudi

Arabia, is the basis of Sunni Islam., the Vatican of Islam and the growing tension between Iran and these two countries is proof to the basic inherent problem between the two kinds of Islam. Turkey is 95-98% Sunni; Iran is the basis of Shiite, and the two countries, even though they have contacts and diplomatic relations and the border is open, this is a fact that is a liability for Turkey mainly.

There is a problem between Turkey and the Kurds, Turkey and Iraq, Turkey and Syria (even though there were some important compacts and understanding), and the borders between the two countries have not been defined, territorial water is also a problem. Turkey is surrounded by conflicts directly or indirectly. Becoming a country with multidimensional foreign policy and becoming a super power with the countries that surround (I didn't mention Israel and the Palestinians as a problem for Turkey) and how to execute the idea of the foreign minister, Ali Babacan, is something that has to be seen in the future. I doubt whether Turkey will manage to execute its ambitions.

Relations between Israel and Turkey:

We started our relations in 1948 with Turkey voting against the establishment of the Jewish State according to the UN partition plan, but the state of Israel was established and Turkey at the beginning of 1949 established diplomatic relations with Israel as the first and only Arab country to have diplomatic relations with Israel for 30 years. Turkey was a cornerstone in our Middle Eastern policy. Turkey, in the last 60 years, had ups and downs in its policies, attitude toward Israel, because I would try to say it gently, not always through those 60 years of relations between the two countries, Turkey wasn't always sure whether it wished to remain part of NATO, part of Europe, part of the US, or to turn to the east. So far, it has been proven from previous times that Turkey was trying to find a balance between east and west that it was impossible to do so. Turkey must choose between east and west. Took several years for Turkey to come to this conclusion and turn back to the west all out, not abandoning the east, but it was clear in those periods of time that Turkey is part of the west.

Today, as it was several times before with various administrations, Turkey is turning again to the east in an attempt to develop relations, cultivate, and create a different balance of power in the area. The problem is, in my opinion, this is my analysis of the events in the last year that brought us to the situation, uneasy situation, between Turkey and Israel today, Turkey is trying to become a member of the UN, and this is a huge failure for the Turkish diplomacy and foreign policy, an enormous failure. It was so easy for countries that just got free from the hands of the Soviet Union when the Soviet Union collapsed - like Poland, the Czech republic, Hungary, etc - gradually to become full members in the UN, and for Turkey that is fighting so many years I think things since the 60s to become a member in the European community and all the developments that came later, failed in all its attempts. This failure comes from various reasons and you all know I'm sure I don't have to elaborate on the reasons why Europe is so hesitant, unwilling to admit Turkey into the EU. There are the spoken reasons, human rights, democracy, economy, the Kurdish problem, and so on, Cyprus is an issue that has to be solved before Turkey is admitted to the EU, and some unspoken reasons why Europe, not only is not admitting Turkey until now to the EU, but I think that Turkey will not be admitted to the EU in the future.

What are the unspoken reasons?

Europe is afraid that open borders with Turkey will bring a storm of cheap labor. I mentioned before Turkey is a country of about 80 million people, they are searching for work because

unemployment in Turkey is very high, standard of living is very low, much lower than in Europe, and once borders are opened between Turkey and Europe, Europe will be flooded.

I think that Israel in the past and at present is paying the price for the Turkish frustrations from Europe, from the west. Israel, the fact that the EU is turning its back on Turkey is causing Turkey so much frustration that they are trying an outlet in the east. It was like this in 1980 after the military takeover, it is like this today. Europe is the main market for Turkish goods but there is, behind the corner, a market of 280 million Arabs, about 75 million Iranians, more than 100 million Pakistanis, potentially a huge market to replace Europe, which is not supplying the goods as far as, is concerned. The turn of Turkey to the east, to the Muslim and Arab countries, should be seen as a reaction to the anger, frustration of Turkey with its relations with the west. The west, not only the EU but also the US, since the collapse of the SU, Turkey became much less important militarily, strategically, to NATO because until the collapse of the SU, Turkey was the only NATO country to have borders with the SU, which made Turkey a very important partner in NATO, strategically military, as far as the US is concerned. Turkey rejected the request by Washington to help the invasion in Iraq, and it made no difference to Washington, so Washington turned to Egypt, to the Suez Canal, but a black point was marked in Washington about the new administration in Turkey, and relations between Turkey and the US are not as they used to be.

If Turkey is turning to the east without abandoning the west they didn't give up their membership in NATO, their secular domestic and international politics, if they didn't give up this they will not give up their relations with Israel, but their relations with Israel are not the same in the last year or two and this is not because of what happened in Gaza because the question was raised when the Prime Minister of Turkey said that it all started with the atrocities made by Israel in Gaza: killing children, butchering civilians and so on, and it's all a matter of human rights, then the question is where have you been when Israel was attacked day and night in Gaza, and when you call Gaza an occupied territory, it has not been an occupied territory for the last 5 years. Where was Turkey when the missiles fell on Israeli civilians? There was not one word to criticize the Palestinians or Hamas. We take issue with Turkey about their arguments on the war in Gaza- Cast-Lead. Turkey has to bring up some excuses in order to justify publicly their turn to the east, but in my opinion they are not going to give up their relations with Israel as long as they aren't giving up their relations with the west. The east isn't going to replace Europe as a market, the biggest market for Turkish goods, and the reliable partner for international politics.

Question and Answer Session:

Financial Times Germany:

Question: Who invented the term neo-Ottomanism? Where does this come from to express this turn of politics? Do you think it's just a threat to the west saying, look we have other options if you don't let us in, or are they really serious about approaching the east and threatening their relations to the west? It seriously threatens relationships to Europe with the hostile remarks toward Israel.

Answer: Neo-Ottomanism' - this is a nice expression that I have collected from Turkish politicians and the press. This is the kind of expression that is trying to concise the new approach from foreign minister Ali Babacan very ambitious, remains to be seen whether he will make the

impossibility of solving “zero conflicts around Turkey.” In a way, yes, it is a threat, if Turkey can develop the Middle East, the Muslim and Arab countries, as a market, equal or even bigger to the market they have in Europe for Turkish goods, then they can say we have an alternative. They have to work hard in order to create this alternative; at the moment they have no alternative, it is Europe, it is the west that is a market, easy access for Turkish goods. First of all it is economically because Turkey has ambitions to develop itself, and this is part of the expectation, so they have to do something revolutionary, even though the income per capita in Turkey is around 8 or 9 thousand. Nevertheless, European countries are doing so well, and Turkey is lagging behind. “You have to run fast in order to stay in the same place” - that’s the motto for Turkey, so the gap between Europe and Turkey is not only that it is not narrowing, in some aspects it is even growing, and this is a source of frustration, compared to Egypt, Turkey is a superpower in economy, technology, compared to the Arab world, compared to its neighbors in the west, Turkey is very poor with low standards in every aspect.

Steve Gutkin, AP:

Question: You say cold relations in Turkey equal a reflection of frustration, but it’s not taking place in a vacuum. There are turbulent relations with Obama, problems in relationship with Europe, Egypt, Jordan, will you concede that part of this is also a generalized problem that Netanyahu has in his dealings with the rest of the world?

Answer: Israel in its 61 years of history has difficulties with the rest of the world all the time. Whether it is because of before the 1967 war and after the 1967 war the territories, the settlements, wherever you put your finger you find a reason, anti-Semitism is not a new thing, even before the state of Israel was established, relations with the US have ups and downs but were always an argument within the family in a way. Even with this administration. There were arguments with President Clinton and Carter and Bush Senior, there were always arguments since Truman, but it was always within the family, Israel and the US. Even with Europe we take it as arguments within the family even though it’s at a different level than relations within the US, but it’s still a family. We feel at home in Europe, Israeli diplomats, Israeli politicians, not as strangers, it’s not the same as traveling in a Muslim or Arab country or serving in a Muslim or Arab country. It’s a different way of describing the arguments.

The same goes with Turkey. Yesterday, the Prime Minister of Turkey said we have the right to criticize Israel for what Israel did in Gaza, but nevertheless our relations with Israel are going to stay the same; so Turkey isn’t going to get into a conflict with Israel in the way that it’s disconnecting relations, boycotting Israel, and so on. As long as you criticize Israel and it’s not mixed with anti-Semitism, then we can swallow it. Once it’s done as it is in Egypt in the official newspapers, criticizing Israel on a daily basis, cartoons, like in the Nazi era, anti-Semitic expressions in the press, this is not to be absorbed by Israel. Trying to criticize Israel by protesting in front of the synagogue in Cairo, this is not a way to criticize, Israel, to express your anger.

Avraham Zuroff: Jewish Tribune & Mishpacha Magazine

Question: Comment on the recent talks between Tehran and Ankara, agreed to a two billion dollar project to crude oil refinery, if Turkey is trying not to anger the west, and when the west and Obama are talking about sanctions toward Iran, how does this partnering reflect their policy?

Answer: Turkey is trying to provoke the west, to irritate the west without breaking or crossing certain red line. If you look at the Turkish foreign policy, whatever they do, it is aimed to irritate the west, but within the family, they don't want to disconnect themselves from the EU, US, NATO. They want to keep it but to become an issue for the west because relations between Europe, the EU and Turkey became a deadlock. They are playing a game on a tight rope and they have to be very smart not to cross this red line. How to do it? I don't know if they will manage or not, at the moment they are so frustrated that they might make mistakes.

The US is angry at Turkey because of what they are doing with Iran, breaking sanctions against Iran, hinting they will break the sanctions when they will be imposed in the near future by the UN. Statements that are exaggerated as far as is Israel is concerned. Yes, they are trying to get back to the focus in the European and American policies in the area. On the one hand they wish to become a superpower in a positive way, to solve problems for others, but they are the focus of troubles inside and around that are insolvable in a way. Iran has the right to have its nuclear capabilities, which is defining the rest of the world, most of the UN members. They are signing agreements and various protocols with Iran at the midst of discussions in the UN about sanctions against Iran. So they are doing the opposite to the trend that is now developing. They are working against the international direction. How else can you describe it if not breaking or hinting about the possibility that they will not get into the international consensus as far as Iran is concerned?

Steve Gutkin, AP

Question: Can you comment on today's news (the ship)?

Answer: Yesterday and the day before yesterday there are other news items making a wide story about the smuggling of weapons with more sophisticated abilities to Hamas to Gaza and to Hezbollah to Lebanon. Iranian military equipment, missiles, yesterday or the day before it was announced that Hamas in Gaza had already got missiles of a range of 60 kilometers. Which seems to me that if they can reach Tel Aviv, that this is for Hamas if they have those missiles. This is the doomsday weapon. Once they use it against Tel Aviv, this is like bombing Israel with nonconventional weapons. This will force Israel to start an all-out war, not waiting for years, but having this is changing the balance of power between Israel and Hamas, between Israel and Hezbollah, and these two organizations are nothing but the long arm of Iran in the Middle East. Israel is not involved in any military conflict in the Middle East except Hezbollah and Hamas. Its only Hamas and Hezbollah that are acting according to the orders from Tehran and equipped by Tehran. The situation is becoming more complicated because the weapons they have acquired are becoming more dangerous to targets in Israel.

Financial Times:

Question: If it is significant that the ruling party is an Islamist party, does this have anything to do with the political shift?

Answer: If Turkey would be dealt by the west, Europe and the US, in a more welcoming way, the fact that the government is ruling Turkey wouldn't make a difference, it wouldn't change Turkish attitude toward Israel because when Ali Babacan came to power 7 years ago, the government did their best to demonstrate their commitment to Europe and to the west and to Israel. Ali Babacan knew how to play the game in the first few years, committed very much to the west, NATO and relations with Israel. If you check the first four or five years of Ali Babacan in power,

they were probably the best years in Turkish foreign relations. Reach 3-3.5 billion dollars in trade, militarily, technologically, politically, Israeli politicians stormed Turkey.

Maneuvers, there were 3 times a year military maneuvers until all of a sudden Ali Babacan decided, at the beginning of the year this year in with Turkey and Israel participated, until 2 months ago the maneuvers were stopped by Turkey. What was Europe's and the US's reaction when Turkey decided to stop the last maneuvers? Their reaction was against Turkey, even in a cynical way. Europe and the US are looking for excuses not to have Turkey in the club, and if Turkey cancels the maneuvers, we can manage without Turkey, but not without Israel. If Turkey is acting against terrorism, as Israel does, they criticize human rights in Turkey, and rightly so. I can understand the west criticizing Turkey and Turkey acting against terrorists.