Israel and Turkey will allow interests to reconcile them
By Ofra Bengio

Israel's three-week offensive in the Gaza Strip in January of this year threatened to wreck the unique relationship between Turkey and Israel. This begs the question: could or should a crisis between Israel and a third party bring about a deep transformation in the bilateral relations that have been developing between the two countries for more than 15 years?

The harsh Turkish reaction to the offensive was taken as a major indication of a Turkish volte-face at both the official and popular level. In a series of unprecedented attacks, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan lashed out at Israel, declaring that the blood of dead Palestinian children would not be left on the ground and that Israel's deeds were "a crime against humanity." Worse still, he called for the expulsion of Israel, a Turkish ally, from the United Nations for ignoring the organization's call to stop the fighting in Gaza.

Then came the Davos incident at the end of January, in which Erdogan demonstratively walked off the stage during a debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres. No wonder Erdogan came to be considered a hero by Gazans, Iranians and Syrians. Taking their cue from him, the media and the Turkish street escalated their anti-Israel and at times even anti-Semitic attacks to a point that in some instances surpassed those voiced in Arab countries. Huge anti-Israel demonstrations flooded the streets of Turkey's major cities and towns; demonstrators burned Israeli flags and waved anti-Israel and anti-Semitic slogans. One of the placards read: "Jews and Armenians cannot enter, but dogs can."

The reaction at the popular Turkish level was part spontaneous and part officially organized, including even the mobilization of school children, which pointed to a political hand acting behind the scenes. Turkey, caught up in these dynamics, appeared to be finding common ground with Hamas, Syria and Iran in the axis of evil.

In fact, Turkey's stance on Gaza should be understood as part of the proactive foreign policy of the government, led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). It was a diversionary ploy at home and a challenge to rivals at home and abroad. Evidently, there was genuine sympathy for the Palestinians among the Turkish people. But the government was also apparently attempting to manipulate this sympathy in order to mobilize support for the AKP in the upcoming Turkish local elections in March by deflecting attention away from the domestic problems with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), while also challenging the military - the architect of relations with Israel - and enhancing Turkey's role among Arab and Muslim countries.

Yet for all these rhetorical and emotional reactions, the Turkish government did not initiate any "punitive" move against Israel. It did not recall its ambassador from Israel as it had done on an earlier occasion. Moreover, at the very time that Erdogan was lashing out at Israel, the two states reportedly signed a new bilateral arms deal.
Many Turks wonder why Turkey, a major power in the region, still needs strong relations with Israel at a time when the entire regional strategic map has drastically changed from the one existing back in the 1990s, when the two forged their strategic ties? The answer seems obvious. To fulfill its proactive role, Ankara needs to remain on good terms with Israel, and thus enhance its stature and maneuverability as an honest broker. It has to preserve its image as a role model of a democratic Muslim country, maintaining the age-old balances between East and West, between the Arab world and Israel, and between Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Most important of all, Turkey needs to maintain its strategic alignment with Israel to ward off the primary dangers facing both countries, especially international terrorism and the possibility of nuclearization of the region.

In Israel, wisely enough, the official reaction to the Turkish attacks was low-key. Indeed, in the eyes of some Israelis it was even too conciliatory. In fact, Israel could not afford the luxury of antagonizing such an important partner in a largely hostile region. The Israeli government was willing to bury its resentment in the understanding that if it managed to contain the crisis in Gaza, it would be able to weather the Turkish storm as well.

Past experience has shown that the two countries' bilateral interests are stronger than sentiments. Notably, the correlation between progress in the peace process with the Palestinians and Turkish-Israeli relations, first apparent in the early 1990s, continues to hold. In the interim, the collapse of the peace process in October 2000 and the ensuing violence caused considerable damage to relations, whereas Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in summer 2005 engendered a flood of visits by high-ranking Turkish officials and even the establishment of a hotline between Erdogan and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

For all the damage done to Turkish-Israeli relations due to the Gaza offensive, the historic bonds of amity between the two peoples and the two states are likely once again to prove strong enough to overcome the latest crisis, even though it might take much longer this time.

Ofra Bengio of the Moshe Dayan Center and the Department of Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, is the author of "The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders" (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). This commentary first appeared at bitterlemons-international.org, an online newsletter.