

Dangers and opportunities after a bloody clash at sea

Toronto Star

PAUL HEINBECKER

FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 2010

History, at least Middle East history, changed course in the Eastern Mediterranean this week.

The Israeli interception of a flotilla from NATO countries bringing humanitarian supplies, particularly the bloody raid on an unarmed, Turkish-flagged boat with several hundred passengers of various nationalities aboard, in international waters, will be neither forgiven nor soon forgotten by the Turks.

That neither Turkey nor Israel was expecting this incident to be so bloody is clear; their leaders had to rush home from half a world away to take things in hand, Benjamin Netanyahu from Ottawa and Recep Tayyip Erdogan from Santiago. That it happened, though, is not a surprise. Turkey and Israel have been diverging increasingly over the Israelis' handling of Palestine generally and over the Israelis' treatment of Gaza, specifically.

How did this incident happen? The Netanyahu coalition appears to have decided to maintain the Gaza blockade at all costs, perhaps fearing its breach this time would open the floodgates. Citing the need to prevent arms smuggling into Gaza, Netanyahu subsequently promised that Israel will continue the blockade. He did not mention that the ship was apparently not carrying arms or munitions to Gaza.

The blockade is regarded by much of the rest of the world (the U.S. and Canada apparently rare exceptions) as unduly harsh, forcing enormous hardship on the territory's inhabitants, a tactic that Judge Richard Goldstone of South Africa labeled collective punishment.

While acknowledging Israel's security concerns, governments around the world, as well as the UN secretary general, have nevertheless called for lifting the blockade immediately, requests that Netanyahu has rejected.

International opprobrium has not prevented Israeli governments from building settlements on Palestinian land, annexing East Jerusalem and building a barrier that intrudes on Palestinian territory, all but ruling out a two-state solution. Successive Israeli governments have not hesitated much to use military force against civilians, including foreign civilians.

As regards the attack on the Turkish boat, perhaps Jerusalem had concluded that relations with Ankara's increasingly Islamist government were going to sour anyway, especially as the latter expressed open criticism of Jerusalem following the 2009 Gaza war. The Erdogan government for its part might have underestimated the Israeli government's willingness to sacrifice its strategic relationship with Ankara. And quite possibly the Islamist party was overly attracted by the partisan political advantages at home of supporting a humanitarian mission to Gaza, solidifying its Islamist base, and appealing to many secularists as well.

While all of these factors were in play, there is no doubt that that the vast majority of Turks, secularist as well as Islamist, thoroughly disapprove of Israeli policies on Palestine. As well, Netanyahu succeeded in uniting the Islamists and the secularists in opposition to his policies. He might also have handed victory in the next election to the Islamists

What does all this mean?

It's too early to be categoric but some things seem likely.

First, the Israeli commando raid tore the fabric of the unique relationship between Turkey and Israel. Turkey was the first and for quite some time the only Muslim country to recognize Israel. Turkey and

Israel have enjoyed a burgeoning economic relationship, with substantial two-way trade, including tourism, and investment. Military cooperation has been significant. The Turkish population, which is not Arab ethnically, and which has had its own chequered history with its former subjects, has had considerable sympathy for the Israelis. In fact, the relationship between the Turks and Jews goes all the way back to the Spanish Inquisition, when the Jews fled into the Ottoman Empire to escape persecution. Their descendants were to play prominent roles in the Empire and the Turkish Republic that followed. In the Second World War, Turkish diplomats rescued Turkish Jews in Europe from the Nazis, and Turkey allowed others to transit Turkey to Palestine. It has not been a relationship without trouble but it has been very valuable to both peoples.

Second, for the U.S. it means a major headache, putting the Obama administration in a conflict between two allies, and just as proximity talks were to start under U.S. auspices between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Under the law of unintended consequences, the conflict between Israel and Turkey will also make it more difficult to persuade the Turks to back off on their nuclear deal with Iran and Brazil and more difficult also for the U.S. to herd support for sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council.

Turkey is a valuable ally, providing military facilities that are important to the supply of the remaining U.S. forces in Iraq. Turkey supplies almost 2,000 troops — Muslim troops — to the common effort against the Taliban. And, still of residual importance, Turkey controls the outlet from the Black Sea of the Russian fleet based there. Further, Turkey has a booming economy, one of the biggest and fastest growing in the world. Turkey is also a NATO ally which the U.S. — and Canada — have treaty obligations to defend.

At the same time, U.S. relations with Israel remain intense, and there is strong support for Israel in the U.S. Congress and among politically influential religious groups. Meanwhile, the support the new Obama administration generated in the Middle East is bleeding away. Washington is between a rock and a hard place.

According to Hillary Clinton, “the situation in Gaza is unsustainable and unacceptable.” Pressure is building on Israel, although international opprobrium has not prevented Israeli governments from building settlements on Palestinian land, annexing East Jerusalem and building a barrier that intrudes on Palestinian territory, all but ruling out a two-state solution. Still, this time something will have to give.

What happens next depends initially on the Turks and the Israelis. The Turkish government is under heavy domestic pressure to respond meaningfully to the Israeli attack. In the first instance, this has meant diplomatic overtures at the UN and NATO, and with the Arab League to rally condemnation of Israeli policy. The Turks (and reportedly the Greeks) have suspended military cooperation with Israel.

But, much more ominous, Turkish humanitarian groups are rumoured to be organizing further attempts to break the blockade. Were that to happen, the Turkish public may well demand that the Turkish navy escort any such convoy to Gaza. The Turkish military is NATO-trained and one of the largest in the world. No one knows what the outcome of such a development would be other than it would likely be bad for all concerned.

Everything possible will need to be done fast to find some sort of compromise between the Israeli insistence on maintaining the blockade to assure its own security and the demand of much of the international community that it be lifted. One solution would be to establish an international ship inspection operation at sea, as has been done to prevent nuclear weapons shipments. Such an operation would be right up Canada's alley if Canada retains any reputation for independence of mind on the Middle East.

Over the longer term, resolving the blockade issue could open the way finally to solving the Palestinian conundrum. History would then change for the better. The world should not waste this crisis.

Paul Heinbecker is director of the Centre for Global Relations at Wilfrid Laurier University and a distinguished fellow at The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), both in Waterloo.