

June 8, 2010, Other Views

By Sean Foley, Ph.D.

The ongoing confrontation between Israel and Turkey over the Israeli seizure of a Turkish-led international aid flotilla, in addition to Israel's three-year blockade of the Gaza Strip, could signal an historic shift in the Middle East and Washington's position there.

Already, the chasm between both U.S. allies has halted all progress on the Obama administration's Middle East initiatives, whether we speak of solving the Arab-Israeli conflict or preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. An Israeli-Turkish military confrontation could spark a regional war and permanently curtail U.S. power in the Middle East.

The principal disagreement between Ankara and Tel Aviv revolves around Israel's blockade of Gaza — a Palestinian community situated on the Mediterranean coast between Israel and Egypt. The territory has the same population as Metro Nashville, but it occupies only 2 percent of the Tennessee region's square mileage. Per capita income is only \$3,100, while much of the infrastructure remains in ruins after being destroyed by Israeli military raids in 2008.

Israeli officials argue that the blockade prevents Hamas, the political organization that governs Gaza, from getting the resources necessary to launch missiles into Israel. They argue that Hamas wants to eradicate the Jewish state, receives substantial Iranian aid, and holds Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier kidnapped in 2006. Israeli officials have also suggested that the Turkish charity that funded the aid flotilla is run by violent extremists linked to al-Qaida.

Some Israelis equate Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has denied that the Holocaust ever took place. The democratically elected Erdogan, however, has repeatedly denounced anti-Semitism and accepts Israel's right to exist.

Jewish-Muslim cooperation

Many Turks believe that Israel's blockade is unjust and that Gazans should be allowed to rebuild. They note that Hamas won free elections in 2006 — just as Erdogan's party won free elections in 2002 and 2007.

They are angered and dumbfounded by an operation in which several of their countrymen were injured or killed. They are equally dumbfounded by the failure of Washington to condemn the operation. After all, Turkey is a member of NATO and supports many U.S. initiatives, including the war on terrorism and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Echoing Turks' anger at Israel, Erdogan

has demanded Tel Aviv apologize, reduced trade and diplomatic ties with Israel, and threatened to deploy the Turkish navy to protect future aid convoys to Gaza.

Fallout from this dispute extends beyond governments to ordinary individuals, including those in the Turkish city of Izmir, where a vibrant Jewish community traces back to the days of Alexander the Great. Jews in Izmir and elsewhere in Turkey are citizens, integrated into society. Izmir's Beth Israel Synagogue exemplifies Jewish-Muslim cooperation in Turkey. The dispute may cloud this cooperation. Turkish police now closely guard the synagogue, which has a large menorah with a crescent moon and star — a traditional Islamic symbol. When my wife and I visited Beth Israel days before the aid flotilla was seized, we were closely scrutinized.

President Obama's first name, Barack, derives from the Arabic word baraka, or heavenly blessings. He will need all the heavenly (and earthly) help he can muster to resolve the dispute over Gaza. The stakes could not be higher for him, Izmir's Jews and the peoples of the Middle East.

Sean Foley is an assistant history professor at Middle Tennessee State University, and author of *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Lynne Rienner, 2010).