



# REPORT



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## **“Israeli, Turkish and Egyptian relations in the Middle East arena against the backdrop of developments in Iran”**

Adenauer Forum with H.E. Reuven Merhav

In cooperation with the Mission of Israel to the EU

Thursday, 1 December 2012

European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

In the beginning of his keynote speech, Ambassador Merhav first of all paid tribute to Konrad Adenauer and David Ben-Gurion for their contribution to the reconciliation between Germany and Israel.

Merhav then approached the main topic from a historical angle: He reminded the audience that the common history of Turkey, Israel and Egypt went back thousands of years ago and that all three countries were closely linked.

Today, Turkey, Egypt and Israel were the three pillars of stability in the Middle East. The current situation in the Middle East could be seen as one of the final stages of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. As with all other empires, this process was taking a lot of time. The victorious powers of WW I had arbitrarily created states: Iraq (having consisted of three different vilayets before) was just one example. The same happened in the Levant region (Sykes-Picot). Sometimes this was followed by conflicts and skirmishes, sometimes the situation remained peaceful.

Egypt was an exception to this rule, as it was a homogenous country. Concerning the future outlook, Merhav was optimistic that after the current turmoil some kind of central regime which will be able to efficiently administer Egypt's resources would emerge. This would be a prerequisite for the stabilisation of Egypt.

Merhav paid tribute to the impressive path of modernisation in Turkey since Atatürk: The country has seen a sustained progress, especially in its successful fight against illiteracy and the creation of a strong academic infrastructure. In this context he mentioned the contribution of Jewish academics who were welcomed in Turkey after having been expelled from Germany.

Regarding the future of the relations between the three partners, Merhav stressed that the days of absolute hegemonic power were over. The solution consisted in equal partnerships: Turkey, Israel and Egypt had something to offer to each other. He also expressed his optimism that the influence of the middle class in Egypt – in cooperation with the armed forces – would stabilise the country in the long-term. He equally acknowledged Turkey's important role in that process: When Prime Minister Erdogan came to Egypt he did not speak as leader of an Islamic country but instead was talking about secularism.

Referring to important stages of the creation of the state of Israel, Merhav argued that there was a place for everyone in the Middle East. In the end,

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Israel has proven to be a very pragmatic nation: Its aim was to be recognized and recognize. Israel was committed to work closely together with both Turkey, Egypt but also with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

**Discussion**

Israel's position: Referring to the increasing depiction of Israel as a rogue state, Merhav argued that if Israel was a dictatorship like Libya it would not have a right to exist. However, Israel was a country where every Palestinian had access to the highest courts; where ongoing and where every killing of a Palestinian would be followed by a thorough investigation and trial. One of the main reasons for the current deadlock in the Peace Process was the lack of political courage from the other side: When Arafat had received a very good offer in 2000, he did not deliver on his end. Merhav argued that leaders had to lead; as long as there was no Arab leader with the courage of King Hussein or Anwar as-Sadat prospects for peace would remain bleak.

Situation in Egypt: Regarding the role of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt after the elections, Merhav took a pragmatic position: First of all, the Muslim Brotherhood had different factions and was different in every country of the region. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had evolved a lot since its foundation; many of its members were close to the school of Al-Azhar and could be considered as moderate. The Salafists were primarily a puritan group and not violent per se. Due to the complex electoral system in Egypt, the final results of the elections should be expected only in January. However, even if the Muslim Brotherhood was to achieve victory, it would have its hands full giving answers to old challenges: it will have to deal with questions of employment but also with food supply.

Relation with Palestine: According to Merhav one of the reasons for the disappointing results in the dialogue was the strong anti-Israel propaganda in Palestine, even in the school textbooks. When such notions of the other side exist, negotiation was difficult. He also blamed it on a lack of political will in Gaza: While the security cooperation with the Palestinian Authorities was excellent, it was terrible in the case of Gaza; Hamas was in full control but was just not willing to be cooperative.

Relations with Turkey: Merhav admitted that relations between Turkey and Israel had seen better days but was optimistic regarding the future. There were disagreements, as regarding the positions towards the Palestinian authorities and Gaza. However, a solid foundation existed. The current situation should rather be seen "as a passing cloud". The EU had a crucial role to play in order to improve the relationship of both parties.

The Deputy Permanent Delegate of the Mission of Turkey to the EU, **Mustafa Turan**, confirmed the existence of a solid basis for the relations between both countries. However, the public opinion in both countries did not seem to know these foundations; current issues risked to erode this common basis. It was crucial to resolve the flotilla issue which was not just a simple incident. Turan argued that it could hardly be explained to public opinion that one could go back to bilateral relations as if nothing has happened. He stressed the fact that nine people had lost their lives in the incident. Any other Prime Minister would at least ask for an apology and compensation, which however has not been made so far by Israel. While there were still disagreements regarding Gaza, the government of Turkey

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had made great efforts to bring the Israeli and the Palestinian sides together in the past. Turan confirmed that Turkey and Israel needed each other more than ever and that the current situation was not beneficial for either side. Merhav regretted the death of nine people in the incident, but stressed that Israel had done what it could to make the ship change its course and that a better communication between Turkey and Israel might have avoided the incident.

Olaf Wientzek