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Neoconservatives Lead Charge against Turkey

By Jim Lobe

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As the right-wing leadership of the organized U.S. Jewish community defends Israel against international condemnation for its deadly seizure of a flotilla bearing humanitarian supplies for Gaza, a familiar clutch of neoconservative hawks is going on the offensive against what they see as the flotilla's chief defender, Turkey.

Outraged by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip's Erdogan's repeated denunciations of the May 31 Israeli raid, as well as his co-sponsorship with Brazil of an agreement with Iran designed to promote renewed negotiations with the West on Tehran's nuclear program, some neoconservatives are even demanding that the U.S. try to expel Ankara from NATO as one among of several suggested actions aimed at punishing Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party) government.

"Turkey, as a member of NATO, is privy to intelligence information having to do with terrorism and with Iran," noted the latest report by the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), a hard-line neoconservative group that promotes U.S.-Israeli military ties and has historically cultivated close ties to Turkey's military, as well.

"If Turkey finds its best friends to be Iran, Hamas, Syria and Brazil (look for Venezuela in the future) the security of that information (and Western technology in weapons in Turkey's arsenal) is suspect. The United States should seriously consider suspending military cooperation with Turkey as a prelude to removing it from the organization," suggested the group.

Its board of advisers includes many prominent champions of the 2003 Iraq invasion, including former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director James Woolsey, and former U.N. Amb. John Bolton.

Neoconservative publications, notably the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review*, have also been firing away at the AKP government since the raid.

"Turkey now represents a major element in the global panorama of radical Islam," declared the *Standard's* Stephen Schwartz, while Daniel Pipes, the controversial director of the Likudist Middle East Forum (MEF), echoed JINSA's call for ousting Ankara from NATO and urged Washington to provide direct support for Turkey's opposition parties in an article published by the National Review Online.

The *Journal* has been running editorials and op-eds attacking Turkey on virtually a daily basis since the raid, accusing its government, among other things, of having "an ingrained hostility toward the Jewish state, remarkable sympathies for nearby radical regimes, and an attitude toward extremist groups like the IHH (the Islamist group that sponsored the flotilla's flagship, the Mavi Marmara) that borders on complicity."

On Monday, it ran an op-ed by long-time hawk Victor Davis Hanson that labeled the IHH "a terrorist organization with ties to al-Qaeda", while an earlier op-ed, by Robert Pollock, its editorial features editor, called Erdogan and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, "demagogues appealing to the worst elements in their own country and the broader Middle East."

Meanwhile, in an op-ed published by *The Forward*, a Jewish weekly, Michael Rubin, a Perle protégé at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), accused Turkey of having "become a conduit for the smuggling of weapons to Israel's enemies", notably Lebanon's Hezbollah.

The onslaught is ironic both because of the neo-conservatives' long cultivation of Turkey and their avowed support for promoting democratic governance — of which they have singled out Turkey for special praise — in the Muslim world.

Neoconservatives were among the most important promoters of the military alliance between Israel and Turkey that began to take shape in the late 1980s and was consolidated by the mid-1990s.

In fact, Perle and another of his protégés, former undersecretary of defense for policy, Douglas Feith, worked as paid lobbyists for Turkey during that period, in major part to persuade the powerful "Israel Lobby" on Capitol Hill to promote Ankara's interests on Capitol Hill.

In 1996, the two men participated in a task force chaired by Perle that proposed to incoming Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu that he work with Turkey and Jordan to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power as part of an alliance

designed to transform the strategic balance in the Middle East permanently in favor of Israel.

But the Turkey promoted by Perle and his fellow-neocons in the 1980s and '90s was one that was dominated by a secular business and political elite carefully monitored by an all-powerful military institution that mounted three coup d'états between 1960 and 1980 and intervened a fourth time in 1997 to oust an Islamist-led government.

Despite its close links to both the U.S. and Israel, however, the Turkish military badly disappointed the neo-cons in the run-up to Washington's invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Instead of insisting that the civilian government at the time grant U.S. requests to use Turkish territory as a major launching pad into northern Iraq, the armed forces decided to defer to overwhelming parliamentary and public opposition to the invasion.

"I think for whatever reason they did not play the strong leadership role on that issue that we would have expected," complained then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a long-time Perle friend and colleague who, despite his lavish praise of Turkey as a model Muslim democracy, headed repeated efforts by the George W. Bush administration to persuade Turkey's national security council — where the military's voice was dominant — to effectively overrule its parliament.

Erdogan, who became prime minister just a week before the invasion and whose political and economic reforms have been widely praised in the West, at first sought good relations with Israel. As late as 2007, he arranged for Shimon Peres to become the first Israeli president to address the Turkish parliament.

By then, however, many neocons had become concerned about Erdogan's efforts to weaken the military's power, his warm reception of a top Hamas leader in 2005, criticism of Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah in 2006, and rapprochement with Syria.

When the military not so subtly threatened to intervene against Erdogan and the AKP in 2007, some neocons, notably Perle, suggested that the U.S. should not try to discourage it. Others, including the *Standard's* Schwartz and Pipes, encouraged it as the lesser of two evils, even as the *Journal* defended the AKP as "more democratic than the secularists."

Since Erdogan's furious denunciation of Israel, and Peres personally, at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) of Israel's Cast Lead operation in Gaza in Jan 2009, however, neocons of virtually all stripes — including those, like the *Journal's* editorial writers, who have praised the AKP as a democratizing force — have turned against Ankara. And the flotilla incident, combined with Erdogan's perceived defense of Iran's nuclear program, has raised their animus to new heights.

"A combination of Islamist rule, resentment at exclusion from Europe, and a neo-Ottomanist ideology that envisions Turkey as a great power in the Middle East have made Turkey a state that is often plainly hostile not only to Israel but to American aims and interests," wrote Eliot Cohen, professor at Johns Hopkins University, in a *Journal* op-ed Monday.