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After Israel Raids Flotilla, U.S. Is Torn Between Allies

By **MARK LANDLER**

WASHINGTON — Struggling to navigate a bitter split between two important allies, the Obama administration on Tuesday tried to placate an outraged Turkish government while refusing to condemn [Israel](#) for its deadly raid on a flotilla of aid ships bound for Gaza.

[President Obama](#) telephoned Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) of Turkey to express his “deep condolences” for the deaths of Turkish citizens in clashes with Israeli soldiers on the ship, the White House said. He told Mr. Erdogan that the United States was pushing Israel to return their bodies, as well as 300 Turks who were taken from the ship and being held in Israel.

Mr. Obama called for a “credible, impartial and transparent investigation of the facts surrounding this tragedy,” the White House said. Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) said such an investigation could include international participation, something the Israelis said they opposed.

It is far from clear that these efforts will mollify Turkey, which accused Israel of state-sponsored terrorism and likened the psychological impact of the raid to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. “No one should think we will keep quiet in the face of this,” Mr. Erdogan declared during a visit to Chile.

The deep rift between Israel and Turkey, which had cultivated close ties, puts the Obama administration in a tough spot on two of its most pressing foreign-policy issues: the Middle East and Iran.

The United States does not want to abandon Israel, which has been subjected to international opprobrium since the raid. The administration is desperate to keep alive indirect peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians brokered by its special envoy, [George J. Mitchell](#).

But it also does not want to alienate Turkey, which is playing an increasingly vocal role on the world stage. Relations were already tender after the United States threw cold water on a Turkish and Brazilian effort to resolve the impasse over [Iran's nuclear program](#). Turkish officials complain that they negotiated the deal with the encouragement and agreement of the administration.

"Turkey and Israel are both good friends of the United States, and we are working with both to deal with the aftermath of the tragic incident," Mrs. Clinton told reporters at the State Department after meeting with Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu.

She conferred with Mr. Davutoglu for more than two hours, rearranging her schedule. Mr. Obama's national security adviser, Gen. [James L. Jones](#), went to see him at his hotel before Mr. Obama called Mr. Erdogan.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Davutoglu harshly criticized the cautious American response to the raid, saying: "We expect full solidarity with us. It should not seem like a choice between Turkey and Israel. It should be a choice between right and wrong, between legal and illegal."

He complained that the United States had delayed and watered down the [United Nations Security Council](#) statement on Israel, which condemned the actions on the ship rather than Israel itself.

Mr. Davutoglu demanded that Israel apologize for the attack, release the detained passengers, return the bodies of the dead, agree to an independent investigation and lift its blockade of Gaza. He said Turkey was prepared to go back to the [United Nations](#) for further action against Israel.

Israel, which defended the actions of its soldiers as a legitimate response to armed attacks by those on the ship, said it could not release the 300 passengers more quickly because they were illegal aliens and had to be held for at least 42 hours under Israeli law. Israel was also

questioning 20 to 30 people who it says were directly involved in clashes with the soldiers.

“We’re going to do our best to heal the wounds with the Turks,” said Michael B. Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, who also met with General Jones and other White House officials.

But Mr. Oren said Israeli authorities had asked Turkey to divert the flotilla to the Israeli port of Ashdod to avoid a confrontation with Israeli forces. He said Israel would have unloaded the cargo of construction material and humanitarian aid and arranged for it to be shipped to Gaza.

Mr. Oren said the Israelis would undertake their own investigation, but he resisted calls for international involvement. Israel has been leery of international investigations since the Goldstone report, which faulted Israel for excessive force in its military strike on Gaza in 2008.

More recently, the South Korean government has won praise for an investigation into the torpedoing of one of its warships, which was aided by the United States, Australia, Sweden and other countries. The report found that a North Korea submarine fired the torpedo.

“The Israelis have traditional and well-founded concerns about international investigations,” said a senior administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “But everyone recognizes that for an investigation to be credible, others have to be able to vouch for the results.”

The flotilla case seems likely to harden Turkey’s skepticism about a United Nations resolution on Iran. Imposing more sanctions now, Mr. Davutoglu said, would only precipitate a confrontation with Iran in a few months, one that would be even riskier because of the broader tensions.

Asked what the best policy toward Iran is, he said, “Diplomacy, diplomacy, diplomacy and more diplomacy.”

Ethan Bronner contributed reporting.