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Turkey threatens to cut ties with Israel over Gaza flotilla

Turkish foreign minister says Israelis must either apologise or accept international inquiry into deadly raid

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Ahmet Davutoglu's warning comes as a surprise as it follows an apparent thaw between Turkey and Israel. Photograph: Adem Altan/AFP/Getty Images

Turkey has hardened its stance towards Israel over the "freedom flotilla" taking aid to the Gaza Strip, warning today that it will sever diplomatic relations unless the Israelis issue a formal apology or accept an international investigation into the incident.

Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, revived tensions when his strongly worded comments were reported by the Hurriyet newspaper and picked up in Israel and across the Arab world.

"Israelis have three options," he said. "They will either apologise or acknowledge an international, impartial inquiry and its conclusion. Otherwise, our diplomatic ties will be cut off."

Ankara withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv after the flotilla raid on 31 May, when nine Turks were killed by Israeli commandos who boarded the Mavi Marmara. But this is the first time Turkey has explicitly threatened to cut off ties completely.

Turkey also cancelled joint military exercises with Israel and banned some Israeli military flights from using Turkish airspace – though Davutoglu called this "a blanket

ban". Israel has refused to participate in an international inquiry into the raid, instead launching its own investigation.

It has also refused to apologise. "Israel cannot apologise because its soldiers had to defend themselves to avoid being lynched by a crowd," its prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, said on Friday.

"We showed them an exit road," said the Turkish foreign minister today. "If they apologise as a result of their own investigation's conclusion, that would be fine for us. But of course we first have to see it."

Davutoglu's warning came as something of a surprise since it followed an apparent thaw between the two countries when he held a meeting in Brussels last week with Israel's trade minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer. The meeting was itself the subject of a political row in Israel after news of the so-called secret session leaked out.

Ben-Eliezer subsequently threatened to "kebab" an aide to Ehud Barak, the Israeli Labour party leader and defence minister, for briefing journalists against him.

Barak revealed today that he had rejected a proposal for a meeting with Davutoglu while both men were visiting Washington two weeks ago. The US has been urging Turkey and Israel to patch up their quarrel.

Barak said he believed that since the proposal was intended to "clarify the Turkish position and make claims against us, such as demanding an international investigation, compensation and so forth, I did not think it was right to hold the meeting".

He told the Knesset's foreign affairs and defence committee that he expected the Gaza blockade to be challenged by more aid ships, including one being organised from Lebanon. The naval blockade, he insisted, would remain in force, even as import restrictions were eased.

Turkey, a Nato member and a secular but Muslim state, was once Israel's closest ally in the Middle East but has reoriented its foreign policy towards closer ties with Iran, Syria and the Arab world, partly because it has been rebuffed over its old dream of joining the EU. Relations were badly damaged by Israel's wars against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and Hamas in Gaza in late 2008 to early 2009.