

Israeli-Turkish Cooperation:

Full Steam Ahead

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

The Israeli-Turkish-U.S. trilateral search-and-rescue exercise taking place this week near Israel's Mediterranean coast highlights the thickening network of ties between Washington's two major non-Arab, Middle Eastern allies. A plus for U.S. interests in the region, Israeli-Turkish relations are watched with growing unease in Damascus, Baghdad, and Tehran, on the one hand, and Athens and Greek Cypriot Nicosia, on the other. The military exercise "Reliant Mermaid" is small-five sea vessels plus helicopters-and confined to humanitarian purposes, but it carries a heavy symbolic message to the region that Israeli-Turkish security cooperation will continue to grow. Turkish officials say more exercises will follow.

Israeli-Turkish update. Turkey and Israel have signed nearly two dozen agreements since 1993, when peace process gains pumped adrenaline into bilateral relations. Key agreements on military training, defense industrial cooperation, and free trade were signed in 1996. Turkish and Israeli pilots now train in one another's air space; the two parties reportedly cooperate in gathering intelligence on Syria, Iran, and Iraq; and civilian and military officials regularly consult about regional developments. Turkish and Israeli officials predict bilateral trade, virtually non-existent in 1990 and now roughly \$450 million, will reach more than \$1 billion by the year 2000.

Arms deals are multiplying. The largest deal has been the \$630 million Israeli upgrade of 54 Turkish F-4 jet fighters. Turkey also will purchase 200 Israeli-made Popeye air-to-ground missiles, and there are plans for co-production of an upgraded Popeye. Just last week, an Israeli-Singaporean consortium won a contract worth \$60 million to upgrade 48 Turkish F-5 fighters. But with Turkey's declaration that it will spend \$150 billion on arms procurement over the next quarter-century, Israel is hoping for much bigger-ticket items, such as tanks, anti-missile systems, and early-warning aircraft. There has apparently been at least one deal in the other direction, too, with Israel reportedly contracting to buy 50 Turkish-made armored vehicles.

Rationale for close relations. Muslim Turkey and Jewish Israel are a natural fit. Both states are Western-oriented and pro-U.S., with military inventories based mainly on U.S. equipment. Both are deeply concerned about terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Non-Arab and largely secular, both are generally mistrusted in a region dominated by Arabs and conservative Islam. They are also the two most democratic, economically dynamic, and militarily

powerful states in the region.

Close relations serve the strategic interests of both sides. Israel gets access to the vast Turkish air space to train its pilots for long-range missions (which could be employed against regional weapons-of-mass-destruction sites); enhances its ability to collect intelligence against arch-foes Syria, Iraq, and Iran; greatly expands its arms-sales opportunities; and eases its regional isolation. Turkey sharpens its military know-how through joint training and close cooperation with the Israeli military; boosts its intelligence-gathering against hostile and potentially hostile Middle Eastern neighbors; and, most important, gains access to sophisticated arms and materiel that can flow unimpeded by supporters of Greek, Armenian, Kurdish, or human rights causes, the issues that make West European states and the U.S. uncertain arms partners for Ankara. The Turks also anticipate that, over time, close ties with Israel will boost their standing with the U.S. Congress and restrain Syria, which borders both Turkey and Israel, from supporting the Kurdish separatist PKK or taking other aggressive actions against Turkey.

The U.S. approach. Washington has rightly taken a supportive position toward ties between two key allies, underscored by its participation in the trilateral exercise, while letting Ankara and Jerusalem direct the pace. The United States can more easily reap benefits if the Israeli-Turkish relationship does not carry a "made in the U.S.A." label. To U.S. advantage, Israeli-Turkish cooperation serves as a model of regional normalization in a period when the multilateral peace process is moribund; a potential nucleus (and cover) for pulling other pro-U.S. states, such as Jordan, into a wider regional security regime; an opportunity for deeper trilateral cooperation enhancing Israeli and Turkish security and increasing weapons inter-operability for U.S. forces at times of regional crisis; a source of pressure on Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's hard-line peace process policies; and a means for the executive branch to bypass Congress in supporting Turkey (through Presidential waivers on Israeli sales of arms that include U.S.-origin technology).

Manageable risks. Close ties with Turkey enjoy consensus support in Israel. Turkey is taking most of the risks, but these appear manageable. Regional reaction will be mainly confined to rhetoric. Domestically, polls suggest that Turks' support for strong ties with Israel is sufficient to offset the determinedly anti-Israel opposition-represented by the pro-Islamist Refah Party and part of the left-giving the Turkish government wide swath to pursue its current policies. Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, echoed by a host of Turkish media commentators, has pointed out the increased value of Israel's friendship (along with that of the United States and the former Soviet Union) in the wake of the European Union's negative verdict on Turkey last month. Refah failed to alter the regime's pro-Israel course while itself in office, and consequently will be hobbled in efforts to use that issue as an effective rallying point against the current government. Turkey will avoid endorsing the particulars of the Israeli government's peace process approach, but the peace process is not now of high priority to the Turkish public. Only a return of the intifada, and perhaps not even that, could alter domestic equations and cause the Turkish government to modify its policies toward Israel.

For Israel, the biggest challenge may be to avoid stumbling into Turkish disputes that Jerusalem sees as having little or no direct bearing on Israeli interests, namely those with the PKK, Greece, and Greek Cyprus. For example, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, reacting to widespread reports of various types of Israeli assistance to Turkey's anti-PKK effort, reportedly warned Israel to stop or suffer unspecified consequences. Its plate already full with terrorist enemies, Israel does not want to be a PKK target as well. Israel traditionally has good relations with the nearby Greek Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus and clearly has no quarrel with Greece (although Greek-Israeli relations have never been warm). Israeli-Turkish relations could have a direct impact on both those nations, however. For example, the Turkish press has been speculating that Israeli-made Popeye missiles will be used to destroy Greek Cypriot S-300 ground-to-air missiles. For Greece, which openly designates NATO ally Turkey as its number-one security threat, any qualitative improvement in Turkey's military capability is worrisome.

Impact on strategic environment. The impact on the regional environment of Israeli-Turkish cooperation is potentially substantial. It is far from clear, indeed probably unlikely for now, that Turkey would allow Israel to stage attacks from its territory, that Israel and Turkey would plan a joint operation, or that Israel or Turkey, lacking a direct interest, would join a war involving the other. Nevertheless, neighboring Iran, Syria, and Iraq must consider and plan for these possibilities—as well as the likelihood of less overt forms of Israeli-Turkish cooperation during hostilities. That, in itself, can be a powerful deterrent to aggressive action.

Though probably to little effect, the trilateral exercise has been heatedly condemned in the region, particularly by those that feel most threatened by Israeli-Turkish cooperation, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Iranian and Syrian denunciations of Jordan's decision merely to observe the exercise are a clear sign of those two states' edginess. Syria fears "encirclement" by three hostile neighbors on its borders. However, the prospect of a regional "counter-alliance," predicted by Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa, is doubtful: Baghdad's rifts with Tehran and Damascus are too deep, and Tehran lacks motivation and means significantly to boost its support for Damascus. For its part, Egypt has criticized Israeli-Turkish ties and declined to observe the exercise. Cairo is unhappy to see Israel ease its regional isolation and skeptical about Turkey's regional intentions. Also, to affirm its role as Arab world leader, it feels it must publicly back Syria and express concern about the emergence of a non-Arab axis in the region. It does not feel directly threatened, however, and will not involve itself in an operational effort to block or counter Israeli-Turkish cooperation. Not all Arab states are critical. In addition to Jordan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, have been mainly mum; Kuwait and the U.A.E. are sufficiently content with Ankara to host Turkish submarine visits this week.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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