

Turkish-Israeli Cooperation, the Peace Process, and the Region

Apr 26, 1996



Brief Analysis

As a Lebanese cease-fire returns a measure of stability to Syrian-Israeli relations, a military cooperation agreement between Israel and Syria's northern neighbor -- Turkey -- is emerging as a potentially key factor in regional politics, provoking strong reactions from Damascus, Tehran, and Cairo. Just as it signals the deepening of relations between two key US allies and a dramatic departure from traditionally cautious Turkish foreign policy, the bilateral agreement also sheds light on Israeli peace process calculations and Egypt's continuing bid to affirm its status as leader of the Arab world.

The agreement: Many details of the agreement, announced in February but largely ignored until recently, remain unclear. According to the Turkish government, it includes joint air force training, naval visits, and "exchange of military information, experience, and personnel." Israeli and Turkish aircraft will be allowed to visit one another's country four times a year each, one week per visit. (The first Israeli planes -- eight F-16s, the aircraft that is also the staple of the Turkish airforce -- began training activities in Turkey last week.) In the wake of Arab and Iranian criticism of the agreement, the Turkish government emphasized that the agreement was not aimed at any third party and said that Israeli planes would not be allowed to carry arms or intelligence-gathering equipment in Turkey. Israeli media reports suggest the agreement also includes provisions for intelligence cooperation aimed at Iran and for Israeli help for Turkish anti-terrorist-infiltration efforts.

Growing ties: In entering the agreement, Israel and Turkey are deepening a relationship that has evolved from lukewarm to very warm in less than three years. This evolution reflects gains in the Arab-Israeli peace process, as well as Turkey's disappointment with Arab world attitudes toward Cyprus, the PKK, and Tigris-Euphrates water. Israeli-Turkish ties now include frequent senior-level and working-level visits for both military and civilian purposes and a variety of military, economic, and cultural projects. Turkish domestic politics may prove to be the major constraint on the growth of Turkish-Israeli relations, mainly pending the fortunes and influence of the fundamentalist and anti-Israeli Refah Party. Now the largest parliamentary opposition group, Refah won a slight plurality in December national elections.

Motivations: As it pursues ties with Israel, Ankara is partly motivated by a traditional desire to boost relations with Washington, particularly with a pro-Israel Congress with which Turkey often has had rocky relations. But it is strategic considerations that now give relations with Israel particular urgency for Turkey. These include: increasing frustration with Syrian support of the PKK; concerns that Israeli-Syrian peace process negotiations not produce an agreement detrimental to Turkish interests, such as unacceptable demands on Turkish water; and a desire for a military relationship with a partner whose materiel is compatible and which won't impose human rights conditions.

Specifically regarding the military agreement, Israeli and Turkish aims overlap but are not fully congruent. For Turkey, the agreement is mainly about Syria and the PKK; for Israel, it is more about air-space and Iran. Turkey's primary goal is to alarm Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad, who hosts and supports the PKK and uses PKK terrorists as a weapon against Turkey, similar to his proxy use of Hizballah in his confrontation with Israel. Ankara wants Assad

to think that it has enlisted the assistance of his powerful southern neighbor in the fight against terrorism and that any military action Syria initiates against one side or the other could quickly devolve into a two-front war. The strength of Syrian protest makes clear that Turkey has gotten Assad's attention. Whether that succeeds in accomplishing a scale-back in Syrian support for the PKK is unclear. Emboldened, in part, by its new relations with Israel, Turkey has grown far more rhetorically confrontational with Syria in recent months. Last week, Prime Minister Yilmaz warned that Damascus would "pay dearly" if it persisted in supporting the PKK. For its part, the Israelis are attracted by the prospect of air force training in Turkey's vast air space. Second, access to intelligence about Iran, which Israel sees as its major long-term threat in the region, was probably a crucial element of the agreement for Jerusalem. Whatever Damascus' fears, Israel probably does not see the agreement as primarily aimed at Assad. Still, Israel apparently doesn't mind if the Syrian president thinks it is.

What it means... The growing Israeli-Turkish relationship -- particularly the military agreement -- is significant for several reasons. First, it marks an unprecedentedly close cooperative relationship between Israel and a Muslim state -- a sort of pace-setter for normalization. Second, it brings together the Middle East's two militarily strongest states and two of its most dynamic market economies; both states are pro-U.S. secular democracies, with militaries based on U.S. equipment. Third, it creates the possibility of enlarged arrangements that include Jordan. Fourth, as the reactions it has aroused indicate, it has altered the psychological environment in which Syrian and Iranian strategic calculations take place. Although Turkey almost certainly would not sanction Israeli use of its territory for staging purposes, neither Damascus nor Tehran can totally dismiss that possibility. For their parts, Jerusalem and Ankara presumably have already reckoned with how Syria's and Iran's perception of the agreement might affect those states' actions regarding both terrorism and the peace process.

...and what it doesn't. First, contrary to the claims of its critics, the agreement falls short of being a full-blown "alliance." There is no evidence -- nor is it likely -- that Israel and Turkey have agreed to come to one another's aid in case of attack. Second, the Israelis, one can be sure, have no interest in involving themselves in Turkey's non-Middle-East-related disputes, such as its rivalries with Russia, Greece, and Armenia.

Israel's peace policies: Jerusalem's willingness to sign an agreement that almost inevitably would be seen by many in the region as anti-Syrian suggests that Israeli concern about Syrian sensibilities has dulled as Damascus has dragged its feet on the peace process. When senior Turkish officials in late 1993 and early 1994 called for "strategic cooperation" and partnership against "Syrian-sponsored terrorism," the Israelis demurred. Israeli Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich explained to a U.S. audience that Israel did not want to do anything to give Assad the impression that Turkey and Israel are "ganging up on him." That concern has now obviously diminished. Indeed, Israel may now think that precisely this type of pressure will make Assad more pliant on the peace process.

Egyptian regional diplomacy: Criticisms of the agreement from Israel's antagonists Iran and Syria, each of which border Turkey, could be expected. Far more surprising is the criticism by Egypt. Implicitly viewing it as anti-Syrian, Foreign Minister Amre Musa called the military agreement a "very serious issue" for the region and warned that "Egypt will not allow security to be upset in favor of one side at the expense of another." Musa reportedly will visit Ankara May 2 to register his concerns and demand explanations.

At first blush, this reaction is curious. After all, why should pro-U.S. Egypt, the first Arab state to recognize and make peace with Israel, object to warmer ties between two other pro-U.S. regional powers? The Egyptian reaction appears to be the latest example of Egypt's mounting effort to affirm its position as leader of the Arab world by adopting a more confrontational approach in relations with Israel. Gaining in intensity over the past two years, this approach has included an unceasing campaign against Israeli nuclear policies and efforts to slow down Israeli normalization with individual Arab states.

Unanticipated Egyptian anger has rattled Ankara somewhat, but there is little that Egypt or others in the region can

do to derail the Israeli-Turkish military agreement. Indeed, Israeli-Turkish relations seem to serve both states' strategic, political, and economic interests and are likely to continue to grow. Similar attitudes toward the US and the West, democracy, secularism, terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism -- plus their "non-Arabness" -- distinguish Israel and Turkey from most states in the region and create a sense of like-mindedness. Still, it is a good bet that at least one Arab state, Jordan -- which has growing ties of its own with Israel, including on the military level, and good but thus far relatively insignificant ties with Turkey -- will explore ways to cooperate with this newly established partnership.

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

Policy #195

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Facing Syria's Food Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)