

Tansu Ciller in Israel: Pursuing Turkish-Israeli Partnership

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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

Prime Minister Tansu Ciller begins the first ever Turkish head of government visit to Israel today, underscoring her personal commitment to developing Turkish-Israeli ties that were virtually dormant as recently as two years ago. In so doing, she is taking Turkey for the first time into an energetic role in support of the Arab-Israeli peace process and the goal of regional cooperation.

Given its traditional caution in foreign policy, Turkey has moved surprisingly quickly and boldly in its relations with Israel, particularly since the signing of the September 1993 Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles (DOP). Paving the way for Ciller's visit have been three unprecedented senior-level visits that have taken place over the past year: visits by then-Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin to Israel in November 1993 and by Israeli President Ezer Weizman and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Turkey in January and April, respectively, this year. In addition, this week Ankara signed a trilateral "memorandum of understanding" with Jerusalem and Washington to aid agricultural development in Central Asia, an area Turkey informally considers a sphere of influence. Other agreements, regarding economic and counterterrorism cooperation, will be signed soon.

Turks Adjust to New Realities

Since Israel has always desired close relations with Turkey -- sharing long borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran, Turkey is of obvious geopolitical interest to Israel -- one must look to Turkey for the reasons for the sudden embrace. From Ankara's point of view, three major factors dictate the change:

The Israel-PLO Agreement: The Rabin-Arafat handshake freed Turkey to pursue the kind of relations with Israel that much of the Turkish security and foreign affairs establishment long desired and that, many believe, the two states already pursued in a quiet and limited way. In effect, the DOP brought Israeli-Turkish relations into the light of day.

Disappointment with the Arabs: Ankara has grown disaffected from a pro-Arab policy that failed to pay anticipated diplomatic and economic dividends. Disagreements over water almost inevitably will deepen Turkish-Arab tensions.

Post-Cold War alienation from the West: As Turkey's stock as a Western security asset declines and Ankara's confidence in NATO security guarantees (particularly against Middle Eastern threats) likewise wanes, Ankara has

become more proactive in pursuing security policies in its Middle Eastern neighborhood.

Ankara's Goals

Turkey envisions potentially wide-ranging benefits from close ties with Israel. In sum, these hoped-for benefits, which fall into four main categories, would override any lingering concern about Arab disapproval.

1) Boosting support in the United States: Ankara's relations with Washington are troubled, with diverging views about Turkey's human rights record, particularly toward the Kurds, a major sore point. Turkey hopes friendship with Israel will score points in the U.S., especially in Congress, historically ambivalent toward the Turks. However, this classic reason for befriending Israel does not fully explain Turkey's Israel initiative, which is largely motivated by Turkish perceptions of its regional self-interest.

2) Bilateral security cooperation: Ankara hopes Israel will help it meet key security challenges from southern neighbor Syria and from the Turkish Workers Party (the PKK), the Damascus-backed, terrorist-insurgent Kurdish separatists operating in Turkey's southeast. Israel, however, has not picked up on the rhetoric of Turkish leaders who have called for "a strategic relationship" or "cooperation against Syrian-sponsored terror." Wishing neither to antagonize Syria nor to make new enemies, such as the PKK, Israel nevertheless is probably amenable to quiet cooperation with Turkey on intelligence and security matters. Without mentioning the PKK, Israeli and Turkish police chiefs last month initialed a counterterrorism agreement in Ankara, which will be signed during Ciller's visit.

And, even without touting it as such, Turkish-Israeli coziness sounds a powerful note of caution to Damascus; Syria now contemplates the implications of unprecedented and growing cooperation between the U.S.-equipped militaries of its northern and southern neighbors, exemplified by reciprocal visits of Turkish and Israeli air force chiefs, reports of a joint air force exercise, and Turkey's consideration of granting Israel a multimillion-dollar contract to refurbish aging Turkish F-4s and F-5s.

3) Economic gains: Now politically unshackled, Turkish-Israeli economic ties also are growing. For years bilateral trade was nearly negligible; in 1993, it jumped to almost \$250 million. Economic cooperation, including in third countries, will surely be a prominent theme of the visit by Ciller, whose party includes dozens of Turkey's top businessmen. Defense contracts, like the F-4/F-5 deal, also could be in the offing.

4) Middle Eastern stability: More than ever in its 71-year history, Western-oriented, secular Turkey is deeply involved in the Middle East. Ankara has been a strong supporter of regional integration projects, including the multilateral Middle East peace process negotiations; Ciller was one of the few prime ministers who attended the Casablanca economic summit this week. Following requests from both Israel and the PLO, Ciller says Turkey is also willing to contribute personnel to the "Temporary International Presence" (TIP) that is eventually envisioned to observe implementation of the Gaza-Jericho agreement; Turkey will be the only Muslim country to participate in the TIP.

Abutting varying degrees of instability or hostility from neighboring Syria, Iraq, and Iran, Turkey seems increasingly to feel a stake in the Middle East peace process and in ties with peacemakers Israel, Egypt, and Jordan as sources of regional stability and as common foes of terrorism and fundamentalism. Reflecting that approach, Ciller will become the first prime minister to visit PLO Chairman Arafat in Gaza Saturday and will then go on to Cairo for three days. She does so knowing that continued success in the peace process, beyond promoting stability, facilitates Turkey's pursuit of a multi-dimensional relationship with Israel.

The Challenge of Islamic Politics

Some skeptics see a cloud darkening the horizon of Turkish-Israeli relations: an increasingly popular Islamist political party in Turkey that is expected to do well in December 4 parliamentary by-elections. However, the foreign

policy implications are far from clear. Islamists -- although anti-Israel -- have focused their appeal on anti-corruption, "social values," and economic themes, rather than foreign policy. Peres' high-profile visit to Turkey in April went forward without a hitch, despite its coming on the heels of nationwide local elections in which Islamists garnered nearly 20 percent of the vote and won prestigious mayoralities in Ankara and Istanbul. At any rate, Ciller's determination to go forward with her own high-profile visit -- she has canceled other foreign trips this month to stay home and campaign -- shows she is confident the fundamentalists will not derail Turkey's initiative with Israel.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. The views expressed here are solely his own. ❖

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