

## Could Turkey and Israel Go to War?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Turkey and Israel are at dangerously opposing ends of Levantine politics, and conflict may be looming.

The Arab Spring and recent dramatic deterioration of Turkish-Israeli ties present Israel with a uniquely threatening security environment. Since 1949, Israel has always had the comfort of having Turkey, one of the two major Levantine powers, as its friend. This is no longer the case. In fact, conflict seems to be looming between Turkey and Israel.

In the aftermath of the 2010 Flotilla Incident, Ankara attempted to intimidate Israel by saying its warships would escort missions to Gaza. Now Turkey and Israel are at dangerously opposing ends of Levantine politics. Not only is Ankara no longer a trusted friend of Israel, but it has also begun to emerge as the key regional actor opposing Israel.

When Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel in 1949, Israel took comfort in the fact that it had the backing of one of the Middle East's most influential players. The strength of the Turkish military allowed it to become and remain a friend of Israel despite Islamist opposition to it.

Following the Camp David Treaty in 1978, Israel established a cold peace with Egypt, bringing the second major Levantine power closer to its side. Whereas in the 1960s Nasser's Egypt represented the center of opposition to Israel in the region, Cairo ceased to pose a threat to Israel in the wake of Camp David. This security environment is all but gone.

For starters, Turkey has become like the old Egypt under Nasser - positioning itself as the regional center of opposition to Israel. Meanwhile, Egypt is becoming like the old Turkey. The outcome of the forthcoming Egyptian elections is far from certain. Yet it is very likely that the Muslim Brotherhood will emerge as a power to be reckoned with in the Egyptian polls this fall. Even if the Egyptian military stands for maintaining ties with Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood will push for limiting those ties. Accordingly, Egyptian-Israeli ties will continue to become more cold and tenuous with each passing day.

For the first time, the two major states of the Eastern Mediterranean are aligning against Israel. This is the most important shift in Levantine politics since Camp David or even since 1949 when Turkey recognized Israel. This new balance is a serious threat for Israel, which must now consider an increasingly hostile Turkey and an ever colder and unfriendly Egypt when it evaluates its security environment.

Yet, the new balance carries risks for Turkey, too. Ankara's September 8th announcement that its warships will escort new flotillas to Gaza bears the potential of armed conflict between Turkey and Israel. What if the Israelis decide to stop the next Turkish navy-escorted flotilla as they stopped the Turkish-backed flotilla in 2010? Will the Turkish navy ships choose to react? As chilling as this scenario sounds, it is not unlikely. If the two countries fail to slow the escalating situation, they could well find themselves in conflict.

The specter of conflict also hangs over gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey objects to Israel's desire to drill in its exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean Sea largely because it hopes to block the Greek Cypriots from having the precedent of an exclusive economic zone in which they could drill for gas to the detriment of the Turkish Cypriots. The latest escalation between Turkey and Israel might just pour oil on the political flames of gas exploration in the Mediterranean Sea.

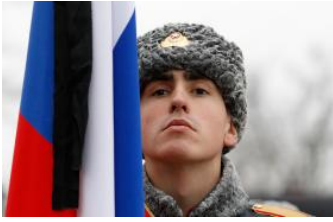
Perhaps Ankara is only bluffing to bring Israel to its knees, and perhaps the Israelis would rather let Turkish navy-escorted flotillas sail to Gaza than risk regional war. But one thing is clear: The Arab Spring and the Turkish-Israeli Winter are churning up the Mediterranean.

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