

Syria and Turkey:

Walking Arm in Arm Down the Same Road?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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In October 2009, Turkey cancelled Israeli participation in longstanding trilateral military exercises and announced instead that it would conduct military training with Syria. To many, Ankara's decision came as a shock. Not only was Turkey (in 1949) the first Muslim majority country to recognize the Jewish state, Israel and Turkey had signed a "military and defense cooperation agreement" in 1996, boosting security ties dating back to the "Peripheral Pact" of the 1950s.

Lately, however, the Islamist government in Ankara, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has taken the once secular moderate state in another direction. Regrettably, based on the trends in Turkish politics in recent years, this development was entirely predictable. The rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus is only the culmination of the increasingly problematic policies pursued by the AKP.

Two factors in particular seem to have mitigated to shift Turkey away from Israel and toward Syria. First, Turkey no longer needed Israeli assistance to pressure the Syrian government to change its policy of providing safe-haven to the terrorist Kurdish Worker's Organization (PKK). It wasn't a coincidence that only a month before the Israeli-Turkish defense agreement was inked, Ankara issued its first official memorandum demanding that Damascus render PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. By the end of October 1998 -- facing a Turkish invasion -- Damascus jettisoned Ocalan and ended its support for the group, setting the stage for improved bilateral relations.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, in the past seven years, once secular Turkish politics have undergone a profound Islamist transformation. In the past, Turkey's foreign policy paradigm centered on the promotion of national interests vested in the West. The AKP, however, sees Turkey's interests through a religious prism. At the same time, the dynamic between the Turkish military and the state's civilian leadership has changed. No longer does the military -- which long considered itself the guarantor of Turkish democracy -- have the upper hand vis-a-vis the government. Today, the Turkish military can do little to impact the policies of the Islamist AKP, which promote solidarity with Islamist, anti-Western regimes (i.e., Syria, Qatar and Sudan) while dismissing secular, pro-Western Muslim governments (i.e., Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia).

For Damascus, the rationale for the rapprochement is less complicated. Syria's Assad regime no doubt sees an increasing coincidence of interest with the policies pursued by Turkey under the AKP. At the same time, Damascus may see an opportunity, via improved relations with this NATO partner, to facilitate diplomatic headway with European states.

The combination of these factors has led to a seemingly unprecedented closing of the ranks between Syria and Turkey today. ... ❖

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