

# Turkish-Israeli Ties in the Context of Israeli-Arab Tension

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Brief Analysis

**A**s Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak prepares for his upcoming trip to Washington, the United States is not the only strategic partner whose ties with Israel may be tested by violence in the West Bank and Gaza. In an era when Turkey's defeat of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its budding rapprochement with Syria have removed some urgency from Ankara's ties with Israel, Turkish-Israeli relations nevertheless remain fundamentally sound. A long and bloody intifada, however, would probably incline the Turkish government, wary of regional and domestic perceptions, away from high-profile arms deals and senior-level visits with Israel.

Improved ties with Damascus Syrian vice-president Abdul-Halim Khaddams' visit to Turkey last week highlights an ongoing thaw in Turkish-Syrian relations. Turkey remains wary of Syria, with whom it has both water and land disputes, but Ankara no longer perceives an immediate and serious threat from Syrian-supported terrorism. Turkish officials say Foreign Minister Ismail Cem will visit Syria soon in preparation for a visit by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to Turkey.

The initial impetus for Ankara to build close ties with Israel was a desire to strengthen its deterrence against Syria, which borders both Turkey and Israel and long supported the Kurdish separatist PKK and other anti-Turkish terrorist groups. This objective was largely achieved in October 1998, when Syria expelled PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, whom it had hosted in Damascus for nearly two decades. At the time, Hafiz al-Asad apparently feared that a fight with Turkey would bring in Israel as well, and decided that surrender of Ocalan was a wiser course of action than taking on his two tough neighbors. The expulsion of Ocalan ultimately captured, tried, and convicted by Turkey marked a crucial turning point in Turkey's triumph over the PKK and, in itself, seemingly validated the wisdom of Ankara's initiative to build close ties with Israel.

An improved relationship with Damascus diminishes somewhat Ankara's sense of urgency in pursuing ties with Israel, however. That may partly explain Turkey's decision two months ago to back off two military contracts, for an intelligence satellite and upgrading of tanks, which it reportedly had decided to grant Israeli companies. The interventions of France (the EU President) and the United States (a key Turkish ally) were probably determinative in Ankara's decision to widen competitive bidding on those contracts. However, were a Syria-based PKK still plaguing Turkey, history suggests that Israel would have been granted the contracts regardless of U.S. and French importuning.

UNGA votes Turkey voted for the October 20 UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that condemned "excessive use of force by the Israeli forces" and "illegal acts of violence by Israeli settlers" against Palestinians. The following week, Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer criticized Israel in similar language in a speech to an Islamic Conference Organization commerce committee meeting in Istanbul.

The U. S. government protested Turkey's October 20 vote, and some Western media misinterpreted the vote and Sezer's comments as a sign of deterioration in Turkish-Israeli ties. In fact, from the beginning of close bilateral ties in the early-to-mid 1990s, Turkish and Israeli officials seem to have ruled out public political support for one another on internationally controversial issues. For its part, Israel, hoping to avoid new enemies, rarely labeled the PKK a terrorist group and never sought to defend Turkey's policies towards its Kurds.

Likewise, Turkey has consistently voted with the Arabs on peace-process-related UN resolutions, even after establishing full ambassadorial-level relations with Israel in December 1991. Of some 179 UNGA peace-process-related resolutions for which votes were recorded from 1992 through 2000, Turkey voted with the Arab majority 170 times all but nine times. (The exceptions generally related to votes on compensation for refugees and on the right of "peoples" to self-determination. Turkish abstentions on these issues probably reflect sensitivities about Armenian and Kurdish claims.) Even during the days of its deepest enmity with Syria, Turkey joined UNGA resolutions demanding that Israel withdraw from the Golan "to the line of June 4, 1967" directly in line with Damascus policy.

Turkish votes differed from those of the EU majority on more than a quarter (45 times) of all peace-process-related UNGA resolutions during 1992-2000. (A majority of the EU backed the October 20 resolution.) Thus, although Turkey aspires for EU membership, it is the Arab world vote, not the EU vote, which is overwhelmingly the indicator of which direction Turkey will tilt at the UN on peace process issues. Meanwhile, Ankara voted with Israel only 4 times and with the United States only 12 times on the 179 resolutions.

Managing ties with Israel The major, if unstated, reason for Turkey's declaration of support for Palestinian and other Arab causes at the UN and elsewhere is its desire to limit criticism from Iran and Arab states, on one hand, and domestic Islamists and traditionalists, on the other. That approach helps Ankara, at least to some extent, to insulate the essential elements of its ties with Israel, security and economic cooperation. Israeli officials tend privately to be sympathetic to this approach and only rarely call attention to Turkish voting patterns at the UN.

In foreign affairs, Turkey takes pains to convince regional states (other than, for a time, Syria) that they should not feel threatened by Turkish-Israeli ties. This has been particularly the case since Ismail Cem became foreign minister in 1997. At home, Turkey's military and civilian leadership often seems uncertain as to how much popular support ties with Israel enjoy, even though few Turks aside from Islamists (themselves now preoccupied with internal problems) have voiced vigorous complaint. Turkish leaders worry that televised images of the al-Aqsa intifada can only inflame the feelings of Turks, over 99 percent of whom are Muslim, stirring radical sentiment and handing Islamists a potential issue with which to whip the government. Moreover, it is at least questionable whether the current occupants of Turkey's four main foreign-policy-making centers—the presidency, prime ministry, foreign ministry, and military—are as doggedly committed to bold ties with Israel as were their immediate predecessors, who largely fathered the relationship.

Overall, ties remain strong. Turkey probably still views Israel as its most important relationship in the Middle East—a key source of military know-how and (presumably) intelligence, as well as its leading regional export market. The two states are likely to continue to cooperate in support of each other's basic security interests. Turkey, for example, made clear its opposition to a unilateral Palestinian declaration of independence last September. Turkey also joins Israel in forthright opposition to political Islam. Last week Ankara announced it had forced an Iranian civilian airliner heading for Syria to land first in Turkey and allow its cargo to be inspected in order to ensure that it was not carrying arms for Hizbullah in Lebanon. Less publicly, the Turks have reportedly turned backed other Iranian

civilian flights for the same reason. (In reaction to Turkish measures, Iran reportedly has asked Iraq for permission to use its air-space for Hizbullah resupply flights.) It is not yet clear just how encompassing or operationally significant the Turkish policy of monitoring Iranian civilian flights is. But the fact that Turkey is willing to take a stand against Iran's policy of arms-provision to Hizbullah and to do so at the height of West Bank/Gaza violence and virtually on the eve of Khaddams' visit was a bold statement on an issue of high priority to the Israelis.

Nevertheless, it is the Oslo agreement that opened the door to wide-ranging Israeli-Turkish relations, and a serious prolonged downturn in the peace process could limit them. A former Turkish foreign minister writing in the Turkish press yesterday claimed that Israel requested that a trilateral U.S.-Turkish-Israeli naval exercise be delayed, apparently so as not to embarrass Turkey during the ongoing violence in the Palestinian territories. Whether or not that report is accurate, the extent to which "showy" aspects of Turkish-Israeli relations can continue as before including high-profile arms sales, publicized joint military exercises, and senior-level visits, as well as openly acknowledged monitoring of Iranian flights to Syria may well be determined by the duration and bloodiness of the new Palestinian intifada.

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