The Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Triangle

by Alan Makovsky **(/experts/alan-makovsky)**

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Brief Analysis

ALAN MAKOVSKY

The emergence of close Israeli-Turkish relations is one of the significant strategic developments in the post-Cold War Middle East. These ties are likely to flourish as long as Israel and Turkey remain pro-Western, anti-Islamic fundamentalist, and compatible in military inventory. Turkish-Israeli ties should be described as a "strategic relationship," not as an alliance. Turkey and Israel are not obligated or likely to go to war if the other is attacked. They also have somewhat differing threat perceptions regarding Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Security and economic ties are the most dynamic elements in Israeli-Turkish relations. The former aspect is better known, including Turkish and Israeli planes training in one another's air space, Israeli arms sales and upgrades of Turkish Phantom jet fighters, and joint search-and-rescue exercises with the U.S. navy. Economic relations are also thriving. Negligible a mere decade ago, Israeli-Turkish trade volume is growing steadily and was nearly a billion dollars in 1999. Israel is now Turkey's leading Middle Eastern export market.

Israeli-Syrian peace poses potential challenges to U.S.-Turkish relations. Syria may make demands on Turkish water to compensate for a concession of Golan water to Israel. Damascus may also press for the removal of Syria's name from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism after clamping down on anti-Israel--but not anti-Turkish--groups. A treaty may free Syria to move its considerable Golan-focused forces north to the Turkish border. But most important, Ankara is concerned that Syria, which Turkey continues to mistrust, will build close post-treaty security ties with the United States, as Egypt and Jordan did after making peace with Israel. In haste to secure an Israeli-Syrian treaty, the United States may be tempted to ignore ally Turkey's security interests. Moreover, these problems could arise at the very time that the landscape of U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations is shifting. The issues upon which Washington most strongly supported Turkey in the 1990s and that most built U.S. credibility in Ankara have lost much of their impact: Turkey achieved European Union candidacy, PKK violence has ebbed, and the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline appears less achievable.

CENGIZ CANDAR

Close ties with Israel are beneficial for Turkey, except for military relations, which in effect have hijacked those ties and now are generally perceived as the backbone of bilateral relations. The Turkish-Israeli "axis" has undermined

many principles of Turkish foreign policy. First, it has forced Turkey to forfeit its goal of playing a strategic role in the Middle East. The late President Turgut Ozal believed Ankara should remain equidistant from the three major regional power centers: Israel, Egypt (representing the Arabs), and Iran. But the military relationship between Turkey and Israel has made this impossible.

Second, Israeli-Turkish military relations have hurt Turkey's relations with Iran. Israel's connection to Turkey has brought it to Iran's border, where Israel has reportedly established intelligence-listening posts. Also, Israel can now attack Iran's nonconventional weapons infrastructure from Turkey or refuel over Turkey. Israeli-Turkish military cooperation has therefore altered a centuries-old balance between the region's leading Shi'i power, Iran, and its leading Sunni power, Turkey. Thirty percent of Iran's population consists of Turkic-speaking Azeris, so Turkey could destabilize Iran more easily than Iran can Turkey.

Third, Turkish-Israeli military relations have had an adverse effect on Turkish governance and domestic politics by enhancing the role of the Turkish military in policymaking. The military made the decision to develop Israeli-Turkish military ties without consulting civilian leaders--the issue was never discussed in parliament, for example--and those ties therefore still lack public legitimacy. Other factors, like the struggle against the PKK and Europe's long-dismissive attitude toward Turkey, also emboldened the military to assert itself in domestic and foreign policy. The Turkish establishment built on its antifundamentalist cooperation with Israel to attack domestic Islamism. The military's "Jacobin" interpretation of Turkish secularism puts it in conflict with even the most benign forms of political Islam.

With regard to the Syrian dimension, it should be remembered that Asad runs an Alawi-based minority dictatorship in Sunni-majority Syria. A restoration of Sunni rule in Damascus after Asad's demise might bring Syria considerably closer to Sunni-majority Turkey. Of course, if Turkey moves closer to Europe--shedding its Middle Eastern identity--and Israel makes peace with Syria, Israeli-Turkish military relations may anyway lose their raison d'etre and prove to be short-lived.

EFRAIM INBAR

Israel is sensitive to Turkish apprehensions about Israeli-Syrian peacemaking. The Israeli government wants to pursue peace with Syria, but it does not consider relations with Syria more important than relations with Turkey. This was not the case in 1996, when Israeli policy was controlled by "misguided doves" like Shimon Peres, Yossi Beilin, and Uri Savir, who did consider Syria more important than Turkey. Ehud Barak shares Turkey's view of the nature of the region. Any peace agreement he makes with Syria will be an unsentimental "armed peace," and Israel, like Turkey, will remain wary of Syria. This type of peace will have no effect on Turkish-Israeli relations.

Turkish-Israeli relations are strong and resilient beyond any special focus on Syria as a common rival. Both countries have good relations with the United States and want the U.S. to remain engaged in the region. They have common enemies like Iran and Islamic fundamentalism. In fact, Iran has set itself up as a counter-model to secular Turkey and has tried to destabilize Turkey. Israel and Turkey also share a common concern about the prospect of a nuclearized Iran. Antiterrorism is another binding element in Israeli-Turkish relations.

Both Israel and Turkey want a "pluralistic" Middle East, without Arab hegemony. Both like the notion of a redefined Middle East that includes Central Asia; in this expanded Middle East, there are more Turkic-language speakers than Arabic speakers. In fact, both states look to the West, and neither really wants to be part of the unstable Middle East. After the Cold War, Turkey "returned" to the Middle East not out of desire, but as a result of problems like the PKK, water, and weapons of mass destruction. But Turkish-Israeli relations do not constitute an anti-Arab alliance; probably impelled by its own proximity to Syria, Arab Jordan is increasingly associated with Turkey and Israel.

Close ties with Israel have benefited Turkey. One example is PKK leader Ocalan's 1998 expulsion from Syria, a

decision in which Turkish-Israeli relations undoubtedly influenced Asad. Another success was Turkey's convincing Cyprus not to deploy S-300 anti-aircraft missiles--a result in which, again, Turkish-Israeli relations played a role. Turkish-Israeli relations are strong, not only because of the strategic military relationship, but also because of the unprecedented cultural and intellectual exchange between the two countries. Of course, Israel was always ready to develop strong relations with Ankara. The big change has been in Turkey's decision to reciprocate this interest.

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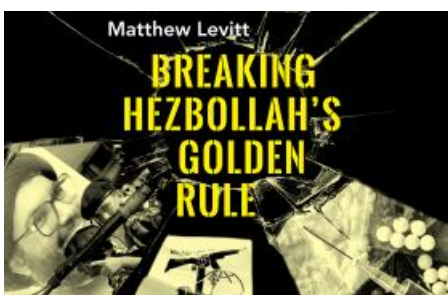(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

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