

Syrian-Israeli Negotiations and Turkey

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Brief Analysis

When Syrians, Americans, and Israelis sat down in Washington this week, they may as well have kept an empty chair for a fourth key player in this equation--Turkey. Turkish water, in particular, will likely be needed to facilitate a Syrian-Israeli deal, but history suggests that Ankara will not provide that water readily--or free. At the least, Turkey will insist that its interests be accommodated in several other areas of Syrian-Israeli peacemaking.

Trilateral Exercise. In an interesting juxtaposition of events, the December 15-16 Syrian-Israeli peace talks took place during a search-and-rescue (SAR) exercise involving Israeli, Turkish, and U.S. naval vessels off the westernmost portion of the Turkish Mediterranean coast. Ironically, Turkish-Israeli military relations began with an agreement in late February 1996, just as the previous round of Syrian-Israeli talks was breaking down. Unease about thriving Turkish-Israeli cooperation may be among the factors that finally led Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad back to the table, just as it helped convince him to backdown and expel Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan last year when Turkey threatened war.

"Reliant Mermaid 99" is the second such trilateral exercise. The first Reliant Mermaid was held off the Israeli coast in January 1998. Syria's neighbor Jordan has been an observer at both exercises. In addition to SAR, this week's exercise also included "surface maneuvering of a military nature," according to the Jerusalem Post. Unlike the first exercise, this one provoked hardly any Arab criticism, perhaps because of the international focus on the peace talks.

The exercise symbolizes how firmly established Israeli-Turkish military ties have become, and the U.S. presence affirms to the region Washington's blessing for these ties. But peace talks with Turkey's neighbor Syria will put to the test both Jerusalem's and Washington's willingness to take into account Turkish security concerns that may complicate peacemaking on the Syrian-Israeli front.

Turkey's Stakes. In its official statements, Turkey has welcomed resumption of Syrian-Israeli talks, if in a somewhat restrained fashion. By contrast, during the last round of talks in 1995-96, a Turkish deputy foreign minister visiting Israel urged Jerusalem to break off the talks if Syria did not cease its support for terrorism; at that time, Ocalan was sitting in Damascus directing an intense terrorist and guerilla assault on Turkey. Even in the altered regional context of 1999, however, the talks threaten to upset a status quo relatively pleasing to Turkey--one in which Syria is weak and isolated. Turks have several concerns about the peace talks:

Water. To Ankara's displeasure, Syrians and Israelis factored assumptions about Turkish water into their negotiations in 1996 without consulting Turkey. Ankara flatly refused to cooperate. Even with its currently more relaxed attitude toward Syria and closer relations with the United States, Turkey probably is not inclined to donate its water to resolve Syrian-Israeli problems. Ankara wants to sell its water, not give it away. And, although it has said it would be willing to negotiate a water agreement with Syria once it is convinced that Damascus has forsworn terrorism, the two sides have radically different approaches to the water issue, so those negotiations would likely be long and complicated. But Turkey is already sending Syria an average of more than 700 cubic meters per second (cms) of Euphrates River water, well over the 500 cms it pledged in a 1987 agreement. Turkey perhaps would agree to formalize some of the excess it is already sending if it is given guarantees regarding other issues that affect Turkish interests in the Syrian-Israeli talks.

Security. Turkey does not want Syrian troops and armaments now concentrated on the Golan Heights cease-fire line to be redeployed to or near the now lightly guarded Turkish border. Ankara also will be concerned that Syria abandon its nonconventional weapons--such as missiles that perhaps can reach Ankara--or that they at least be strictly limited and monitored.

Terrorism. It is a virtual certainty that Israel will require Syria to end its association with anti-Israel groups and that Syria, in turn, will insist that the United States remove it from the list of state-sponsors of terrorism as a reward for agreeing to peace with Israel. Turkey will want to ensure that any decision about dropping Syria from the terrorism-sponsor list give equal weight to Syria's record regarding anti-Turkish groups, including the PKK and other leftist groups that still enjoy at least some measure of safe-haven in Syria. Moreover, it will want its own determination of Syrian support for anti-Turkish terrorism to be treated as authoritative.

Aid. Ankara presumably would welcome the emergence of a moderate, pro-U.S. orientation in Damascus. To that extent, Ankara would likely be more accommodating of U.S. aid for Syria the more it is convinced that Syria has genuinely moved into the fold of moderate, pro-U.S., antiterrorist states. But a skeptical Turkish jury will remain out for several years on the issue of Syria's moderation. Thus, Turkey probably would oppose the infusion of massive assistance, particularly military assistance, into Syria--at least initially. Ankara may well urge that Washington tailor its development aid to Syria to regionwide programs like transnational highways or regional water distribution schemes that will directly benefit Turkey and will tie Syria into peaceful, interdependent relations with its neighbors.

Turkish-Israeli relations. Ankara probably is concerned that Israel will limit its security relations with Turkey to facilitate ties with its newest peace partner--a plausible, if unlikely, prospect. At an earlier stage of Syrian-Israeli peacemaking and Turkish-Israeli relations, the "new Middle East"-oriented Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres did seem inclined to favor ties with Syria over ties with Turkey. Ankara likely will seek assurances from Jerusalem regarding the continuation of strong bilateral ties.

The U.S. Dimension. Turkey probably hopes to persuade Israel to take all its concerns into account. But it will be U.S. policymakers, more than Israeli negotiators, who will decide the extent to which Turkish sensitivities about Israeli-Syrian peace arrangements matter. Turkey remains sensitive about the U.S. failure to consult it during earlier Israeli-Syrian negotiations and, in general, about Washington's seeming tendency to relegate Turkish interests to a lower priority than that of Middle East peace. It is legendary in Turkey that President Bill Clinton's first-term secretary of state, Warren Christopher, made nearly two dozen trips to Syria without stopping by to brief Ankara. This time around, it would behoove Washington to keep the Turks apprised of the emerging contours of Israeli-Syrian peace and to seek to assure that the peace is one Ankara can support.

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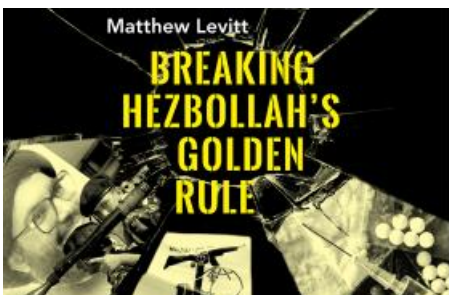
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