

# Reflections on Turkish-Israeli Relations and Turkish Security

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Brief Analysis

**T**urkey and Israel inhabit a region troubled by security concerns that include religious fundamentalism, terrorism, illicit trafficking of arms and drugs, transfer of weapons of mass destruction, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and mass movements of refugees. These two states thus have overlapping security interests as well as political and economic interests.

Turkish-Israeli military cooperation was initiated to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. It is not an alliance, however. Because of their leading roles in the region, Turkey and Israel have a responsibility to establish a model for relations among regional countries.

Turkey became a "front country" in the region when new threats emerged after the Cold War. This new situation led Turkey to become a "strategy-producing" country. The initiation of Turkish-Israeli relations should be seen in this light. Contrary to the beliefs of some, neither the United States nor any other third party initiated Turkish-Israeli cooperation or the 1996 military training and cooperation agreement. These were the initiatives of the Turkish leadership.

The military agreement signed between Turkey and Israel paved the way for resolution of the Turkish-Syrian crisis of autumn 1998. Syria's more responsive attitude toward Turkey since then proves that the Turkish-Israeli agreement works. Prospects for truly good relations with Syria in the near future are very questionable—for both Turkey and Israel. As long as Syria makes territorial claims on Turkey and its support for terrorism continues in any form, it is apparent that it will be difficult to improve relations much beyond their present state. It is also a fact that terrorism linked to Syria remains an important factor blocking the Middle East peace process.

If there is a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, it would be a result of the agreement between Turkey and Israel. In that case, the agreement will have contributed to peace in the region.

Relations between Turkey and Israel should not be confined to the Middle East. Economic cooperation with the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union may offer an additional dimension to existing Turkish-Israeli relations.

## Former Soviet Union

The threat of nuclear war has been marginalized in post-Cold War Europe. Europe has begun a transformation process to achieve political, military, and economic integration as a precondition to becoming the second superpower in the world. Unfortunately, this Western and Central Europe-focused integration process does not encompass all regions of Europe.

Eurasia (the Caucasus and Central Asia) will be an alternative source for the energy requirements of the twenty-first century, with its greater reliability compared to the Middle East. Taken together with the Middle East, oil reserves in the Caucasus and the Caspian Basin constitute 70 percent of the world's total oil reserves and 30 percent of the world's total natural gas reserves. This portends intense competition among the powers for influence in Eurasia—a struggle that will help shape the twenty-first century.

The possibility of maintaining peace and security in the Caucasus in the short run is not high. The Azeri-Armenian conflict is the biggest obstacle impeding such peace and stability, and it indirectly affects our entire region. Other sources of instability in the Caucasus emanate from the problems in Abkhazia and Chechnya. This atmosphere suits those nearby who aim to keep the region under their control.

The newly independent states must be integrated into the Western community so they do not feel isolated and seek non-Western alternatives. In that regard, Turkey must convince its European friends to reshape the security architecture of Europe. Ignoring Eurasia, European countries seem not to be familiar with where Europe's real borders the security borders are. From the Turkish perspective, it is very important that they gain this awareness.

Turkey is doing its best to integrate the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union into the West. Under NATO auspices, Turkey has been running a Partnership for Peace (PfP) training center in Ankara since 1997. Moreover, Turkey has military agreements with most of these countries and is trying to increase its coordination with them in every field. All Turkey's activities are aimed at enhancing Eurasia's security, stability, and integration into the West. If other Western states look at Eurasia from the standpoint of Western integration, and not only from an economic perspective, many problems in the region will disappear.

Turkey's policy is to have good relations with Russia in every field, including security and the economy. Western policy is also to make Russia a Western country. Yet, the Russians are focusing their attention on their so-called "near-abroad," that is, the states of the former Soviet Union. While they are trying to Westernize their country in central Europe, they are denying that opportunity to the former Soviet states in our region. Encouraging the Westernization of the Russian Federation should mean not allowing Russia to follow a "near-abroad" policy or to be a superpower again.

Turkey and Greece

If both sides act cleverly, they may find nonproblematic areas in which to cooperate, such as tourism and environmental protection. Militarily, Turkey and Greece have been testing confidence-building measures, and these have worked well. Over time, Ankara and Athens may make use of some of these positive developments to tackle other, more difficult issues.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Levent Onar.

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