

Turkish-Israeli Military Cooperation: An Assessment

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The deepening military relationship between Israel and Turkey has heightened Arab and Iranian concerns about the potential implications of this new axis between the two most powerful states in the region. Though these anxieties seem exaggerated, it is animated by a fear that this thus far limited relationship could eventually evolve into a full-fledged military alliance.

Military Cooperation: An Overview. Israeli-Turkish military cooperation formally dates to the signing of two defense cooperation agreements in February and August 1996. Though the contents of these two agreements remain secret, they are believed to include protocols regarding officer exchanges, visits by military delegations, naval port calls, access to training areas, joint air and naval training, cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism and border security, and defense industrial cooperation. In addition, Israel and Turkey are believed to have strengthened long-standing intelligence ties.

Defense Industrial Cooperation. Jerusalem and Ankara have signed several contracts that could transform Israel into a major supplier of arms and technology for Turkey, enabling the latter to circumvent sanctions by its traditional suppliers in Western Europe and the United States (imposed due to the efforts of anti-Turkish lobbying groups and to punish alleged human rights violations perpetrated in the course of Turkey's war with the PKK). These contracts include a \$650 million deal for Israel Aircraft Industries to refurbish and upgrade fifty-four Turkish Air Force F-4E Phantom aircraft (some of the work to be done by Turkish firms in Turkey) and to equip them with fifty Popeye 1 air-to-ground missiles, and a subsequent \$150 million coproduction agreement for hundreds of Popeye 2 air-to-ground missiles. Turkey has also reportedly shown interest in obtaining Israeli help in modernizing its ageing fleet of F-5 fighter aircraft and M60 tanks, and in coproducing Israeli reconnaissance UAVs, the Phalcon airborne warning aircraft, the Arrow anti-missile system, and the Merkava tank. With Turkey also planning to expand and modernize its fleet of attack and transport helicopters and its navy, Israeli firms are positioned to land additional major contracts.

Training and Exercises. The air force training exchange agreement calls for Israeli aircraft to train in Turkey four times a year. During the first visit, in April of last year, eight Israeli F-16 fighters spent a week at Akinci air base near Ankara. Such visits are mutually beneficial. They enable the Israelis to gain experience flying long-range missions over mountainous areas (a skill that would be necessary for missions over Iran), and provide greater opportunities for overland training than are available in a small country like Israel. This enables pilots to refine their competitive skills, since it is much harder for pilots to visually identify enemy aircraft over land than over water. Such exercises also enable both air forces to become familiar with procedures and tactics used by their counterparts. This familiarity could facilitate cooperation in wartime. Israel and Turkey also held a joint naval search and rescue exercise in the eastern Mediterranean in June of this year, and they are scheduled to hold a trilateral Israel-Turkey-U.S. naval search and rescue exercise later this year.

Intelligence and Security. Israel and Turkey have shared intelligence on various matters for a number of years now, and this cooperation has reportedly been expanded. Israeli and Turkish officials recently met to share assessments relating to terrorism and the military capabilities of Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Moreover, unconfirmed reports in the Arab press claimed that Israeli intelligence personnel accompanied Turkish troops into northern Iraq last May to set up an intelligence listening post there. Israel is also reportedly helping Turkey to secure its border against Kurdish PKK terrorists operating from bases in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, drawing on its own experience in securing its border against terrorists in South Lebanon.

Implications for Syria and Iran. No country sees itself more directly affected by the emerging Israeli-Turkish military axis than Syria. Damascus is particularly concerned about the problems Israeli-Turkish military cooperation could pose in the event of a war with Israel. Though neither agreement signed thus far are believed to contain provisions for joint contingency planning or warfighting, the possibility that Turkey could assist Israel in wartime is a complicating factor Syria has to consider. In the future, President Asad will have to face the possibility of fighting Israel in the Bekaa and/or the Golan, while looking over his shoulder toward Turkey.

Even without directly participating in a war, Turkey could play an important role in the event of Israeli-Syrian hostilities. On the ground, the Turkish army could mass its forces along its border with Syria. This could tie down Syria's strategic reserve (the two or three divisions located near Homs and Aleppo that are earmarked to reinforce the Bekaa and Golan in wartime) in much the way that the threat of Turkish intervention tied down tens

of thousands of Baghdad's troops in northern Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. In the air, Turkey could allow damaged Israeli aircraft to land at Turkish air bases and permit Israeli combat search and rescue crews trained to snatch downed pilots to operate from its soil. This would allow the Israeli air force to be more aggressive and take greater risks when attacking targets in northern Syria. Turkey could also pass on data derived from reconnaissance flights along its border with Syria using long-range cameras and electronic sensors that can see deep into Syria, or it could allow Israel to use Turkish air bases to launch manned and unmanned reconnaissance flights over Syria itself. It could likewise allow Israeli attack helicopters, aircraft, and commandos hunting Syrian Scud missile launchers in northern and central Syria to operate from Turkish staging areas, and it could allow Israel to use the series of air bases that run parallel to its border with Syria for combat missions, raising the possibility of attacks against Syria by way of its "weak underbelly." This could compel Syria to reorganize its air defenses--oriented primarily to deal with Israeli threats from the southwest or west--to enhance coverage of the north of the country. Thickening air defense coverage in the north will mean thinning coverage of the center and southwest of the country. At sea, Turkey could allow Israel to operate out of its naval base at Iskenderun or sanctuaries in Turkish waters near Syria, forcing Syria to split its fleet to defend its exposed coastline against attacks from both north and south. For its part, Turkey might exploit the opportunity offered by a war to launch air strikes on PKK targets in Syria.

For Iran, Israeli-Turkish military cooperation has brought Israel to its border. Israel has reportedly established intelligence listening posts there, and Turkish cooperation would greatly facilitate Israeli air strikes on Iran's nonconventional weapons infrastructure, much of which is located near Tehran. (Israeli aircraft could stage from and/or refuel over Turkey, greatly increasing their striking range.)

Conclusions. Turkey could make a significant contribution should Israel try to strike at Iran's nonconventional weapons infrastructure, or find itself involved in a war with Syria. While the extent of Israeli-Turkish military cooperation in the event of a war with Syria would be situation dependent, current political realities rule out Israeli aircraft and warships operating from Turkish territory in wartime. Turkey would gain little by openly supporting the Israeli war effort, which would make Turkey a target for Syrian retribution (i.e. more terrorism) and Arab political censure. Turkey is therefore more likely to quietly render assistance to the Israeli war effort, providing intelligence, missile early-warning data, and refuge for damaged Israeli aircraft or warships. In this way, it will help Israel punish a troublesome neighbor and gain the good will of Israeli political and military leaders, without incurring major risks. Most important, perhaps, is the psychological impact of the emerging Israel-Turkish axis, which introduces an element of uncertainty into the military calculations of Syria and Iran. To the degree that this enhances Israeli (and Turkish) deterrence, it will have a tangible impact on the balance of forces in the region if current political and military realities preclude a formal alliance between the two countries.

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