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- The rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus is only the culmination of the increasingly problematic policies pursued by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP).
- Two factors in particular seem to have led to Turkey's shift away from Israel and toward Syria. First, Turkey no longer needed Israeli assistance to pressure the Syrian government to change its policy of providing safe-haven to the terrorist Kurdish Worker's Organization (PKK). Second, in the past seven years, once secular Turkish politics have undergone a profound Islamist transformation.
- At the same time, the dynamic between the Turkish military and the state's civilian leadership has changed. No longer does the military have the upper hand. Today, the Turkish military can do little to impact the policies of the Islamist AKP, which promote solidarity with Islamist, anti-Western regimes while dismissing secular, pro-Western Muslim governments.
- As Ankara's politics under the AKP have shifted and Turkey has become seemingly less committed to Europe, the state has seen its star rise in the Middle East. Syria's Assad regime likely sees its burgeoning relations with Turkey as an opportunity to shuffle the existing architecture of regional alliances.
- Perhaps more worrisome is the prospect that Ankara may over time pursue a closer foreign policy alignment with [Iran](#) that would undermine U.S. and Israeli regional interests. Ankara's shift toward Damascus and Tehran makes it even more unlikely that Turkey will participate in "crippling sanctions" to help prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon.

The Islamist Transformation in Turkish Politics

In October 2009, Turkey cancelled Israeli participation in longstanding trilateral military exercises and announced instead that it would conduct military training with Syria. To many, Ankara's decision came as a shock. Not only was Turkey (in 1949) the first Muslim majority country to recognize the Jewish state, Israel and Turkey had signed a "military and defense cooperation agreement" in 1996, boosting security ties dating back to the "Peripheral Pact" of the 1950s.

Lately, however, the Islamist government in Ankara, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has taken the once secular moderate state in another direction. Regrettably, based on the trends in Turkish politics in recent years, this development was entirely predictable. The rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus is only the culmination of the increasingly problematic policies pursued by the AKP.

Two factors in particular seem to have mitigated to shift Turkey away from Israel and toward Syria. First, Turkey no longer needed Israeli assistance to pressure the Syrian government to change its policy of providing safe-haven to the terrorist Kurdish Worker's Organization (PKK). It wasn't a coincidence that only a month before the Israeli-

Turkish defense agreement was inked, Ankara issued its first official memorandum demanding that Damascus render PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. By the end of October 1998 - facing a Turkish invasion - Damascus jettisoned Ocalan and ended its support for the group, setting the stage for improved bilateral relations.¹

Second, and perhaps more importantly, in the past seven years, once secular Turkish politics have undergone a profound Islamist transformation. In the past, Turkey's foreign policy paradigm centered on the promotion of national interests vested in the West.² The AKP, however, sees Turkey's interests through a religious prism. At the same time, the dynamic between the Turkish military and the state's civilian leadership has changed. No longer does the military - which long considered itself the guarantor of Turkish democracy - have the upper hand vis-à-vis the government. Today, the Turkish military can do little to impact the policies of the Islamist AKP, which promote solidarity with Islamist, anti-Western regimes (i.e., Syria, Qatar and Sudan) while dismissing secular, pro-Western Muslim governments (i.e., Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia).

For Damascus, the rationale for the rapprochement is less complicated. Syria's Assad regime no doubt sees an increasing coincidence of interest with the policies pursued by Turkey under the AKP. At the same time, Damascus may see an opportunity, via improved relations with this NATO partner, to facilitate diplomatic headway with European states.

The combination of these factors has led to a seemingly unprecedented closing of the ranks between Syria and Turkey today.

Post-Ocalan

Between 1984 and 1999, the PKK was responsible for the killing of 30,000 Turks.³ Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the terrorist organization, orchestrated the attacks from his Damascus safe-haven, a policy designed to provide Syria's Assad regime with leverage to advance its territorial demands in the disputed Hatay region.⁴ While Syria's deportation of Ocalan (in conjunction with the October 20, 1998, Adana Agreement) ended overt hostilities between the states, the relationship didn't really blossom until the AKP came to power in the November 2002 general elections.⁵

In just seven years, Turkey and Syria have signed 46 treaties of cooperation, and today, Damascus is the capital visited most often by AKP foreign ministers.

In 2002, after the AKP victory, Turkey and Syria signed a military training agreement. Two years later, in January 2004, Bashar Assad became the first Syrian president ever to visit Turkey. Later that year in December, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan returned the favor, and when he was in Damascus, signed a free trade agreement that had been under negotiation for several years. The agreement was important, according to a journalist who accompanied the Turkish delegation, because it included a clause in which Syria ceded its claims to Hatay.⁶

At a joint press conference after the meeting, Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri predicted that "our links will develop in all fields in the future, especially in trade," while Erdogan noted: "It shows how far relations have come between the two countries."⁷

Improvements in relations between Damascus and Ankara initially didn't appear to have much of an impact on Turkish-Israeli relations. Despite periodic rhetorical flourishes - in 2004, Erdogan denounced the Israeli killing of [Hamas](#) leader Ahmed Yassin as "a terrorist act" and Israel's [Gaza](#) policy as "state-sponsored terrorism" - the strategic relationship continued to progress. In 2005, Turkey purchased three unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems from Israeli companies for \$183 million, and announced the development of seventeen new joint Turkish-Israeli military projects.⁸

Meanwhile, the bilateral military exercises Reliant Mermaid and Anatolian Eagle continued apace, as did robust economic cooperation. By 2005, Turkey was Israel's largest regional trading partner, importing \$900 million in Israeli goods and exporting \$1.2 billion in goods to Israel.

As the AKP consolidated power, however, some ominous signs for the Turkish-Israeli relationship started to

emerge. In February 2006, AKP officials met with Hamas officials after the terrorist organization's parliamentary election victory in the [Palestinian Authority](#). Then, during the Israeli war against [Hizbullah](#) that summer, according to Israeli officials, the Shiite militia was resupplied with spare parts and components for mobile missile launchers from Iran via trucks travelling across Turkey to Syria.⁹ Nevertheless, until 2009, Turkey continued to broker Israeli-Syrian peace talks in Ankara.

2009: The Watershed Year

Turkey's policy of maintaining good relations with both Syria and Israel - emblematic of the state's broader policy of working toward "zero problems" with its neighbors¹⁰ - seems to have shifted in 2009. The change coincided with Israel's January military operation in Gaza.

Ankara was extremely critical of the operation and, later that month, Erdogan demonstrated his disapproval via a very public walkout from the January 2009 Davos Conference, where he was paired on a panel with Israeli President Shimon Peres. (Erdogan subsequently justified the exclusion of Israel from the Anatolian Eagle exercise based on Israel's Gaza operation.) Later that month, Turkish efforts to broker a Syria-Israel deal ended.

As Turkish-Israeli ties entered a period of crisis, Ankara enhanced its relations with Damascus. In April 2009, Turkey and Syria conducted their first ever joint military exercises. Then in September, the states announced the establishment of a "Senior Strategic Cooperation Council," and agreed to end visa requirements.¹¹ More recently, in October 2009 - the same week that Turkey cancelled Israeli participation in Anatolian Eagle - Ankara announced yet another round of military exercises with Syria. And just a few days following these exercises, on October 14, Syria and Turkey conducted the first meeting of their strategic cooperation council.

At a joint press conference on October 14 celebrating the inaugural convening of the council, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu suggested a new era of bilateral relations. "From now on," he said, "Turkey will continue walking on the same road [as Syria]...sharing a common fate, history and future. We are going to walk hand in hand and work together to revive our region as a center of civilization."¹²

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem also praised the burgeoning bilateral relationship, and went a step further, hinting at Syrian hopes of things to come: "Relations between Syria and Iran are excellent...we are open to all friends in the region who want to establish such cooperation with us. And we welcome a strengthening of Turkish-Iranian ties and it pleases us."¹³

The rapprochement between Syria and Turkey comes as both states are reaching out to old foes. As Moualem noted, Ankara has been improving ties with Iran; meanwhile, Syria has taken steps to patch up its four-year row with Riyadh. In October, after the visit of [Saudi Arabia](#) King Abdullah to Damascus, Assad regime advisor Boutheina Shaaban went so far as to describe Syrian coordination with Riyadh as on a par with that of Tehran and Ankara.¹⁴

It's not surprising that Damascus has been so eager to align with Turkey. As Ankara's politics under the AKP have shifted and Turkey has become seemingly less committed to Europe, the state has seen its star rise in the Middle East.¹⁵ Syria's Assad regime likely sees its burgeoning relations with Turkey as an even sum game with Israel, and an opportunity to shuffle the existing architecture of regional alliances.

Implications

Clearly, 2009 was a watershed year for the Turkey-Syria bilateral relationship and a year of setbacks for Israeli-Turkish ties. While the long-term implications of these developments remain to be seen, the current trajectory is not cause for optimism.

Turkey's move toward Syria epitomizes the changes in Turkish politics that have occurred under the AKP. For Washington, this shift in orientation raises questions about Turkey's viability as a NATO member state.¹⁶ Turkey's political transformation could likewise have implications for the remarkable military and economic bilateral relationship that has developed in recent decades between Israel and Turkey.

Israel's military relationship with Turkey - including ongoing joint air force training, military exchanges, and arms sales - appears to be secure for the time being. Should bilateral political tensions continue - and as Ankara and Damascus enhance strategic ties - inevitably Israeli-Turkish military to military relations will suffer. Perhaps more worrisome is the prospect that Ankara may over time pursue a closer foreign policy alignment with Iran that would undermine U.S. and Israeli regional interests.

Turkey's current foreign policy makeover seems to be driven as much by the government's Islamist ideology as by more pragmatic concerns. In 2008, Prime Minister Erdogan hinted at the pragmatic aspect of Turkey's foreign policy reorientation. After Ankara tilted toward Moscow following the Georgia invasion, Erdogan justified the tack toward Russia, saying, "we have an important trade volume [with Russia]. We would act in line with what Turkey's national interests require."¹⁷

Like Russia, Turkey is investing in Syria, and like Ankara and Moscow, a pro-Syria lobby of Turkish businessmen has reportedly focused on cultivating and supporting even closer relations between the states. This key constituency suggests that Turkish-Syrian rapprochement may be quite resilient.

For Damascus, the newfound relationship with Ankara represents a great success, all the more so because it may come at Israel's expense. While the operational aspects of the bilateral ties are a work in progress, at a minimum, the rapprochement will insulate Damascus from - or at least make it more costly for Israel to launch - punitive military actions against Syria such as the September 2007 raid on the Kibar nuclear facility. More importantly, Ankara's shift toward Damascus and Tehran makes it even more unlikely that Turkey will participate in "crippling sanctions" to help prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon.

The Assad regime will no doubt look to deepen its strategic relationship with Turkey and encourage Ankara's ties to Tehran. While these developments are cause for concern, for the time being, Turkey remains firmly anchored in NATO and will only go so far. Instead, in the coming months, it seems more likely that Ankara will seek out improved relations with Syria and Iran, while maintaining its strained but nevertheless robust ties to the Jewish state.

With the stakes so high, Israel and Washington will be watching closely for signs that Ankara's Islamist government is aligning even more closely with militant Middle Eastern states. To be sure, if the current trend continues, Syria will be among the leading benefactors.

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Notes

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1. Ocalan was captured in Kenya in 1999 and extradited to Turkey.
2. In 1946, Turkey allied itself with the West in the Cold War, and since then successive Turkish governments have pursued close cooperation with the United States and Europe. Turkey viewed the Middle East and global politics through the lens of its own national security interests, making cooperation possible with Israel, a state Turkey viewed as a democratic ally in a volatile region. The two countries shared similar security concerns, such as Syria's support for terrorist groups abroad - radical Palestinian organizations in the case of Israel, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. In 1998, when Ankara confronted Damascus over its support for the PKK, Turkish newspapers wrote headlines championing the Turkish-Israeli alliance: "We will say 'shalom' to the Israelis on the [Golan Heights](#)," one read.
3. Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Bombings: The Ultimate Weapon?" Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel, August 7, 2001, <http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/68/currentpage/25/Default.aspx>.
4. Soner Cagaptay, "An Opportunity that Comes Once a Millennium," *Hurriyet*, June 10, 2009, <http://www.cagaptay.com/5740/turkey-pkk-opportunity>.
5. Some scholars argue that improvements in the bilateral relationship were also driven by the U.S. invasion of

[Iraq](#), which both the Turks and the Syrians opposed. See, for example, Altunsik and Tur, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations," *Security Dialogue*, 2006; 37; 229.

6. Yoav Stern, "Turkey Singing a New Tune," *Haaretz.com*, September 1, 2005, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=524517>.

7. "Syria and Turkey Agree on Water Problems," *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, December 23, 2004, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/975/syria-and-turkey-agree-on-water-problems.html>.

8. Brock Dahl and Danielle Slutzky, "Timeline of Turkish-Israeli Relations, 1949-2006," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/documents/44edf1a5d337f.pdf>.

9. Eli Lake, "Iranian Shipments to Hezbollah Strain Israeli-Turkish Relationship," *New York Sun*, August 23, 2006, <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/iranian-shipments-to-hezbollah-strain-israeli/38364/?print=3273447521>. *Washington reportedly issued a formal complaint to Turkey over the incident.*

10. Bulent Aliriza, "Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 9, 2008, <http://csis.org/publication/turkey-and-crisis-caucasus>.

11. Borzou Daraghai, "Turkey, Syria: Nations Sign Historic Accord, End Visa Requirements," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/09/turkey-syria-two-nations-sign-historic-accord-end-visa-requirements.html>.

12. Sebnem Arsu, "Turkey and Syria Signal Improved Relations," *New York Times*, October 14, 2009.

13. "Al-ta'awun al-Istratigi yadkul fi salb al-Ilaqa Al-Suriya al-Turkiya," *Al Watan*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.alwatan.sy/newsd.php?idn=66502>.

14. Ziyad Haydar, "Shaaban: Al-tansiq al-Suri al-Saudi yudaf ila al-tansiq maa Turkiya wal Iran," *Al Watan*, October 8, 2009, <http://www.alwatan.sy/newsd.php?idn=66502>.

15. See, for example, Paul Salem's op-ed in *Al Hayat*, "Al Sharq al-awsat yadkhul al-'Asr al-Turki," October 30, 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/70793>.

16. David Schenker, "A Nato without Turkey?" *Wall Street Journal Europe*, November 6, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704013004574517210622936876.html>.

17. Bulent Aliriza, "Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus."

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