

Burgeoning Military Co-operation between Turkey and Israel: Together in otherness

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In the last five years, there have been significant developments occurring in Middle Eastern politics, specifically in the military and security spheres, that have had a profound effect on the regional security order of the region, and will continue to for many years to come. This refers to the emergent and deepening Turkish-Israeli military relationship. Although both Turkey and Israel face real threats to their security, and even to their territorial integrity, and they share a number of reasons for seeking closer military collaboration, there are also certain motivations that differ slightly and can be used as explanations for their deepening relationship. This will be explained in more detail below.

A proper clarification of the title, "Together in Otherness," is first required. This phrase is based on the fact that both Jews and Turks came to the region as settler-conquerors, and both are distinct from the Arab and/or Muslim populations already living in areas that eventually passed to Ottoman/Turkish and Jewish/Israeli control.

As is well-known, the Middle East population is virtually 100% Muslim, and it is also overwhelmingly Arabic in composition. It has been for a long time. About 800 years elapsed between the time Arabs under Mohammed first broke out of Saudi Arabia and conquered much of the modern Middle East at the expense of the Byzantine Empire, and the time when the Ottoman Turks finally defeated the Empire and took Constantinople, in 1453, inaugurating the ottoman Empire. The ottomans eventually came to rule over the Arab populations of the area. Discontent with the Turks as overlords became more prominent in the last years of the Empire, until World War I and its aftermath dissolved the Empire and independent Arab states were created out of the ottomans' former dominions.

The story of the creation of Israel is also well-known. Jews began immigrating to what was then known as Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. The Arabs who lived in Palestine resented this influx, especially as wealthy Jews in the Diaspora began buying tracts of land and giving them over for Jewish settlement. By the time of the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, Jews represented a significantly higher proportion of the general population than they had for centuries. The Arabs rejected the Partition Plan, Israel proclaimed itself a state in 1948, and a day later five Arab armies invaded. What became known as the Arab-Israeli conflict was born.

Both these circumstances left a lasting impression on the Arab inhabitants of the region. Suspicion and outright resentment at the intrusion of these foreign peoples has remained, and these feelings have been exacerbated by the fact that, in addition to already infringing within the Arab midst, chunks of territory have been taken from Arab hands and transferred to Turkish and Israeli authority. In the case of Turkey, this refers to the 1939 decision by the French to allow Ankara to annex the area of Hatay, formerly a possession of the province of Syria during the Ottoman Empire, which the French had governed since 1921. Damascus, for its part, has never recognized this annexation. In the case of Israel, during the 1948-49 war, Israel captured one-third more territory than had originally been allotted to it in the Partition Plan. During the Six

Day War of 1967, Israel seized even more territory: The Golan Heights from Syria, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. Matters are made somewhat worse by the fact that Israelis, at least Jewish Israelis, practice an entirely different religion.

The current Turkish-Israeli military relationship revolves primarily around two agreements signed in 1996. The first was on February 23, when the two countries signed the Military Training Cooperation Agreement. It was supposed to be secret, and indeed much of its contents remain classified and unavailable, but leaks to the Turkish press announced its existence. Some of its major components include: the provision that each country's air force be allowed to train in the other's territory up to four times a year; naval and air exercises; establishment of radar networks; protocols for officer exchanges and visits by military delegations; strategic dialogue meetings; and, most analysts believe, intelligence co-operation, especially over Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

The second major accord was signed in August. It dealt primarily with the exchange of technical knowledge and expertise, and paved the way for implementing a deal for Israel to upgrade fifty-four Turkish F-4 Phantoms. This agreement was later enhanced in December, when the terms of the modernization of the F-4s was agreed on at a cost of \$650 million.

Although the February and August defence pacts are considered to be the defining landmarks in the contemporary Turkish-Israeli military relationship, several other agreements, mostly relating to defence-industrial co-operation, have also been signed. In January 1997, Turkey announced it would be spending \$150 billion over the next twenty-five years to overhaul its military and modernize it effectively to meet all potential threats to its security. Some of these plans include joint production of the Popeye II ground-to-air missile (Turkey had already purchased fifty Popeye Is), the 400-kilometre range Delilah cruise missile, and Israeli work on Turkey's F-16 fighter planes. Ankara has also shown interest in co-producing the Phalcon airborne warning aircraft, the Arrow antimissile system, and missile and attack boats. In addition, it has been reported that Turkey will purchase from Israel the Python-4 air-to-air missile and would manufacture the Israeli Galil infantry rifle. The two governments have also expressed interest in collaborating in the area of space research.

As if to underscore these expanding links, Turkey and Israel held for the first time a joint naval exercise on January 7, 1998, dubbed "Reliant Mermaid." The United States also participated and Jordan sent an observer to these five-hour search and rescue operations, which drew a storm of protest from the Arab world and Iran. The exercise involved approximately 1000 sailors, an American destroyer, two Israeli Saar missile boats, two Turkish frigates, and a number of Israeli helicopters and maritime patrol aircraft.

In addition to these accords and agreements, there have been numerous visits by both civilian and military leaders from Turkey to Israel, and vice versa. It should also be pointed out here that although the military aspect of this relationship remains of primary consideration, it is supported by other facets, including cultural, tourism, diplomatic, financial, and, perhaps most importantly, economic factors. For example, a free trade agreement between the two countries came into

effect in May 1997, and this accord is expected to increase mutual trade to about \$2.5 billion by the year 2000.

The motivations driving each country toward military collaboration now need to be discussed. These are significant because, as mentioned earlier, both Turks and Jews are often seen as outsiders and foreigners in a region populated primarily by Arabs and Muslims.

Most of these concerns and driving forces are the result of changes that have occurred in the international system within the last decade. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity and the Cold War have opened up a virtually brand-new vista for many states in the world, especially in areas formerly considered a primary battleground between East and West -- areas such as the Middle East. Countries now realize they do not need to conform to their respective camps' positions to the same degree anymore, and are relatively free to make choices based on their own individual security needs.

The end of the Cold War also meant there were several new players in the international field, and the rulebook of bipolarity had to be thrown out and a new one written. In the case of the Turkish-Israeli military relationship, both countries decided the host of new concerns could best be dealt with by developing stronger ties between them, ties that would enable each to overcome, or at least to better face, those newer threats emerging within the last few years.

Since its inception as a modern republic in 1923, Turkey has equated progress and modernization with Westernization, primarily Europeanization. It has tried throughout the years to strengthen its relationship to Europe, becoming an Associate Member of the European Community in 1963 and submitting an application for full membership in 1987. Although a Customs Union went into effect in January 1996, there has been little or no progress since regarding Turkey's entry into the European Union. In December 1997, the EU held a summit in Luxembourg to determine which states would be eligible for talks leading to eventual membership. Five Eastern European countries were placed on the immediate list, as well as Cyprus, and five more were scheduled for discussions at a later date. Turkey was not on any list.

This rejection coincides with a reluctance on the part of individual European states to engage in arms sales to Turkey: Norway and Belgium have imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, and Germany also did so for a few months in 1992. In addition, the American Congress has been dissatisfied with Turkey's human rights record, and has been extremely averse to selling any offensive weapons to Turkey. Frustrated, Turkey has had to look elsewhere for a guaranteed and continued supply of sophisticated, technologically-superior weaponry to meet its security needs, as well as friends and supporters.

This search led Ankara to Israel, which, it should be mentioned, attaches no preconditions to its arms sales. In addition to its own very capable indigenous defence industry, Israel has access to American arms and has proved itself capable of turning a deaf ear to Washington's protests when Israel transfers technology or arms to other countries the United States disapproves of.

This is Turkey's main reason for engaging in close co-operation with Israel. There are three sub-parts to this motivation. First, Turkey is locked in an antagonistic and volatile relationship with

Greece over numerous disputes that remain unresolved and that have shown no signs of easing. Second, Turkey is trying to face down Syria and Iraq over issues of terrorism and vital water rights, and given all the experts' predictions about the scarcity of this necessary resource in the Middle East, it is not unreasonable to assume that without any viable solutions, wars over water will break out at some time in the next century. And third, given its geopolitical location and foreign policy, Turkey has a significant role to play in the emerging friction over Caspian Sea energy resources and the explosive capacity of the Caucasus and Central Asia to disrupt the flow of these resources to outside markets.

Turning to Israel, one has to realize that Israel is a tiny country with almost no strategic depth. In the past, this was militarily acceptable, as Israeli defence doctrine called for preemptive or first strikes by its air force against opposing forces and carrying any fighting out of Israeli territory as quickly as possible, as well as the potential last resort of using a nuclear weapon. However, it seems as though the strategic balance is slowly shifting away from Israel's favour in the last years of the twentieth century. As one writer put it, "odds are that before the end of the decade the strategic balance in the region will undergo radical change inimical to Israel's nuclear hegemony."

This refers to the spread of ballistic missile technology and weapons of mass destruction throughout the Middle East and surrounding regions. Although there remains little doubt that Israel would win a conventional war against its neighbours, with these newer weapons the "regular" battlefield concept no longer exists. There is no longer any doubt that Iraq is, or was, trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction, and Iran is also believed to be in the process of doing so, along with the search for ballistic missiles to dominate at least the Persian Gulf. The same holds for Syria.

Military co-operation with Turkey lends credence to at least Syria's worst fear: having to fight a two-front war in the event of hostilities. Even if fighting broke out between Syria and Israel, for example, and Turkey did not participate directly, Israel could probably use Turkish territory to conduct surveillance flights or as a base for search and rescue operations. There have been reports in the Turkish press that Israel is secretly building an air base within Turkey that will be used strictly for Israeli purposes. If this were true, it would also allow Israel the ability to penetrate Iraq and Iran without having to fly through any other country's air space, and be able to cause greater damage. Relations with Turkey thus helps offset some of the disadvantages Israel is currently beginning to face.

The Turkish-Israeli military relationship has not been viewed very favourably in the Arab and Muslim world. Syria, which stands to lose the most from such a coalition, in particular has been reacting vigorously. For a long time an enemy of Iraq, the two have now opened their borders after eighteen years of closure and begun talks on how to further warm up their previously cold relations. Damascus has also tried to enlist Greece and Iran in some form of counter-alliance, at least according to reports. Although it is unsubstantiated so far, some analysts believe that Greece and Syria have signed some sort of military pact directed primarily against Turkey.

Middle Eastern politics and security studies is made up of several sub-components, including, but not limited, to the Arab-Israeli conflict, inter-Muslim and territorial disputes, and Persian

Gulf tensions, so it is difficult to say precisely what will happen in the next few decades as a result of the Turkish-Israeli military collaboration. As a preliminary conclusion, however, it can be said that relations between the two look strong, supported as they are by many different legs but primarily because both face security threats from several common sources. Each has a particular security requirement that needs to be met, and it seems that by co-operating with the other these necessities can be fulfilled.

As for the claims by certain Muslim states that this relationship enhances regional instability, this author believes the evidence, both historical and contemporary, proves otherwise. Turkey and Israel provide each other with a stronger form of deterrent capability, and this forces any country that might be thinking about taking military action against one of them to take this into consideration.

In the end, two questions need to be answered if one is to be able to conclude with complete accuracy what the future of this relationship means. First, can the Middle Eastern Muslim states punish or reward Turkey enough to make it curtail ties with Israel? And second, can Israel come to a solid enough agreement, not necessarily a peace treaty, with its neighbours that would make its military collaboration with Turkey less necessary, or even a liability?

Although these questions cannot be answered with any great degree of exactness just yet, it seems that the answer can be found somewhere in the negative.