

Israel's Warming Ties with Regional Powers: Is Turkey Next?

Ari Heistein

Wavering United States support and the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East have provided an impetus for Egypt and Saudi Arabia to seek unprecedented cooperation with Israel on issues of mutual interest. Over the past year, Turkey's normalization deal with Israel, growing security challenges, and strained ties with the US ostensibly put Ankara's relationship with Jerusalem on a similar track. Accordingly, the bases for Israel's increased collaboration with Egypt and Saudi Arabia warrant further study in order to determine whether Israeli-Turkish cooperation is similarly ripe for growth.

Egypt and Israel: Working Together to Defeat Hamas and the Islamic State

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt remains skeptical of US support for two main reasons. First, President Sisi witnessed Washington's demand that President Husni Mubarak step down in the face of the Arab Spring protests in 2011, despite close US ties with the Egyptian leader for three decades; from Cairo's perspective, this sent the message that the Egyptian government should not expect US support in a time of crisis. Second, the US response to the Egyptian military's 2013 overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood, which paved the way for Sisi's rise, was lukewarm. Though the US refrained from calling the military seizure of power from a repressive but democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government a "coup" and cutting off all foreign aid, it showed its displeasure at the resurgence of the repressive military regime by placing a hold on the sale of sophisticated weapon systems to Egypt such as F-16s and Apache helicopters. Even when announcing the

Ari Heistein is the special assistant to the Director of INSS. His work is made possible through the generosity of the Israel Institute.

end of the hold on advanced weapon systems in 2015, President Obama did not repair relations fully, as he also announced 2018 as the end date for Egypt's cash-flow financing. Many Egypt analysts rightly predicted that the Obama administration's ambivalent support would not succeed at moderating Egypt's domestic policies toward political rights as much as pushing Cairo to diversify its alliances. To that end, President Sisi has signed deals to buy fighter jets from France and air defense and helicopters from Russia, and he was even willing to enhance cooperation with Israel.

Expanded cooperation between Cairo and Jerusalem is based on a shared strategic interest in fighting the de facto alliance of the Sinai-based Islamic State affiliate, Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) and the Gaza-based offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas. From Cairo's perspective, Wilayat Sinai threatens Egypt's stability by engaging it in an ongoing guerrilla campaign that has caused hundreds of fatalities within the Egyptian military, while according to current legislation in Egypt, Hamas's linkage to the Muslim Brotherhood marks it as a terrorist affiliate; the Brotherhood was outlawed as a terrorist group by Cairo in the aftermath of President Morsi's overthrow and poses the greatest political threat to the Sisi regime. In addition to ideological kinship between Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian government sources claim the groups collaborated in carrying out terrorist acts such as the 2015 assassination of Egypt's prosecutor general Hisham Barakat. From Israel's perspective, the threat posed by Hamas and Wilayat Sinai to Egypt also endangers Jerusalem's interests by potentially causing the collapse of one of the only two Arab governments that have signed a

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peace agreement with Israel; Egypt's descent into chaos would mean a failed state of around 90 million people on Israel's southern border. In addition, the fact that the majority of Israel's population is within range of the Hamas missiles stockpiled in Gaza as well as the group's demonstrated willingness to use them makes Hamas the second most dangerous non-state actor to Israel after Hezbollah (which has significantly larger and more advanced rocket and missile stockpiles in Lebanon). As for Wilayat Sinai, although it has not carried out notable attacks on

Israel since swearing allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014, it launched a mass casualty attack in Israel in 2011 under its previous name of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Israeli security officials noted in September 2016 that they were

expecting Wilayat Sinai to try to strike Israel again at some point in the near future.¹ In addition, Hamas and Wilayat Sinai cooperation has reinforced the capabilities of each organization, causing a noticeable improvement in Wilayat Sinai's ability to inflict casualties on the Egyptian military² and enabling Hamas to rearm in preparation for future conflicts with Israel.

Although much of the improved security cooperation between Jerusalem and Cairo has occurred behind closed doors, there is ample evidence that it has increased dramatically since President Sisi's 2013 rise to power. Coordination has become so close that in addition to intelligence sharing, Israel has even carried out drone strikes on Egyptian territory against Wilayat Sinai militants at Cairo's behest.³ Also, as part of its strategy to defeat jihadist groups in Sinai, Israel opted to allow Egypt's troop levels in the peninsula to substantially exceed the numbers mandated by the 1979 peace accord and any exceptions it had allowed prior to 2013. Meanwhile, Egypt is laboring hard to destroy the Gaza-Sinai tunnels (a major venue for Wilayat Sinai and Hamas cooperation), and President Sisi acknowledged publicly that he speaks with Prime Minister Netanyahu "a lot." Israeli support for Egypt's military even extended into the diplomatic arena as in 2013 and again in 2015, the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC came to Cairo's aid by fighting against and ultimately defeating several restrictions on US military aid to Egypt.⁴

Saudi Arabia's Unofficial Cooperation with Israel

Like Egypt, Saudi Arabia sought cooperation with Israel in a time of chilled relations with Washington. The Arab Spring brought the Saudi-US differences to the fore in numerous theaters, including Egypt and Syria. From Riyadh's perspective, the United States pushed President Husni Mubarak, a close Saudi ally, out of power after the death of a few hundred protesters demonstrating against his rule while doing relatively little to oust the Iran-allied Assad regime from power in Syria despite its relentless massacre of civilians. Since 2011 US ambivalence in both spheres has caused Riyadh concern about Washington's future dependability in the region. In addition, the nuclear negotiations with Iran and the signing of the JCPOA exacerbated Saudi fears of abandonment by Washington, and President Obama did little to reassure the Saudis of strong US support.⁵ At the same time, Saudi support for jihadist groups in the Syrian civil war, such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra),

to push Assad out of power was seen by US officials as putting United States national security at risk.

In contrast to the tension between Washington and Riyadh on Middle East affairs, Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are closely aligned in their prioritization of regional threats. The foremost objective for both countries is thwarting Iranian ambitions in terms of regional interference and nuclear proliferation. Jerusalem and Riyadh also agree that degrading the capabilities of Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies is a critical component of any effort to foil Iran's aims to disrupt the regional order. A secondary priority that Israel and the Kingdom share is defeating Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. While these groups pose limited threats to the modern armies of Israel and Saudi Arabia, they do pose serious threats to imperiled allies such as Egypt and Jordan.

Despite the fact that the two countries have no official relations, the convergence of interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia has led them to work toward similar ends on major regional issues. While little is publicly known about the Israeli-Saudi cooperation on the issue of Iran's nuclear program (beyond the "unofficial" campaign against it⁶), there is common cause between the two countries in weakening Iranian-backed forces in Syria, as Saudi Arabia arms and funds rebel groups fighting the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria axis while Israel remains a staunch rival of Hezbollah and has allegedly assassinated several of its senior military leaders.⁷ In addition, Israeli and Saudi efforts to preserve the existing order in countries such as Jordan are complementary: the Israelis generally provide security know-how and training, while the Saudis keep these countries' economies afloat with grants and aid projects.

Turkey-Israel Relations: Past, Present, and Future

Ankara's relations with the United States have endured particular strain due to differences surrounding Erdogan's growing authoritarian tendencies, the failed coup attempt in July 2016, and the civil war in Syria. While Erdogan thought that his allies in Washington should have called him immediately after the 2016 coup attempt to offer support (as did Russia and Iran), instead Secretary Kerry called Turkey's President and warned him against excessive repression.⁸ As in the case of past attempts to promote democracy in the Egyptian context, the US support for the human rights agenda was perceived by Ankara as an attempt to meddle in its domestic affairs. Moreover, the tension over "US interference in Turkish affairs"

is exacerbated by Ankara's unmet demand that Washington extradite Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, the man Erdogan claims is responsible for orchestrating the attempted coup against him. In fact, some senior Turkish officials have even accused Washington of collaboration with Gulen in plotting against the Turkish government.⁹ In the Syrian theater, Ankara and Washington suspected each other of supporting terror groups that endangered each other's national security. Turkey was infuriated by the fact that the US partnered with the Kurdish YPG militia as part of its strategy for defeating the Islamic State. In response to the US policy of training and arming the Kurds, the Turkish President went so far as to question the US-Turkey alliance, saying, "Is it me who is your partner, or the [PKK/YPG] terrorists in Kobane?"¹⁰ From Washington's perspective, Erdogan's permissive attitude toward violent jihadist¹¹ groups was extremely worrisome.

In the golden age of Turkey-Israel relations in the 1990s, cooperation was based on mutual strategic interests that converged in Syria.¹² The primary Turkish concern was the Kurdish separatist insurgency, while Israel's focus was the threat posed by Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Army. From Turkey's perspective, Damascus endangered its security by supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party),¹³ which launched a guerrilla campaign against Turkey and threatened to foment separatist sentiments amongst the country's millions of Kurds. For Israel, Syrian support for the Hezbollah paramilitary organization facilitated the group's acquisition of sophisticated weaponry and advanced training from Iran, and at the same time the Syrian Arab Army was the most threatening conventional military force on Israel's borders.

For as long as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was underway, Turkey was free to cooperate closely and openly with Israel on the Syrian threat. The peace process of the 1990s had a profound impact on Turkey's policy toward Israel because even in the days when Turkey's government was militantly secular, before the rise of the Islamist AKP in 2002, Ankara's ties to Jerusalem were heavily influenced by the tempo of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For example, in 1980, when Israel passed the Jerusalem Act that established East and West Jerusalem as the country's unified capital

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city, Turkey downgraded its representation at its embassy in Tel Aviv.¹⁴ In contrast, after the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, Turkey restored full relations with Israel and tried to play a role in brokering an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

During this period of close ties, the Turkish-Israeli cooperation yielded much fruit. First, the countries shared intelligence and Turkey granted Israel access to its airspace bordering on Syria, Iraq, and Iran, which improved the IAF's ability to collect intelligence about its most serious enemies. Second, because the US and other Western governments were unwilling to supply Ankara with some of the sophisticated weaponry it needed to fight the PKK insurgency at the height of the violent struggle, Israel stepped in to supply the Turkish military with equipment and technology. The defense contracts between Israel and Turkey were valued at hundreds of millions of dollars and included agreements in which Israel upgraded the Turkish Air Force's F-4s and F-5s and sold Python 4 air-to-air missiles to Turkey. Third, Turkish-Israeli cooperation proved its worth for Ankara in its major area of concern: the Kurdish issue. In fact, Hafez al-Assad's 1998 expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is attributed to the growing pressure Syria's President felt from the Israel-Turkey alliance. Fourth, within one decade, yearly trade between Jerusalem and Ankara increased ten-fold from \$100 million in 1990 to over \$1 billion by 2000.¹⁵

However, in the following decade, the Syrian threat declined on Turkey's list of priorities, and common interests between Ankara and Jerusalem followed suit. In some sense, the relationship may have been a victim of its own success. After Syria conceded to Turkey's demand that Damascus expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1998, which many attribute to Israeli-Turkish pressure on Assad, the "Turkish threat perception began to change."¹⁶ At the same time, Israel's concerns regarding the Iranian and Syrian backed Hezbollah only grew.

Moreover, the collapse of the peace process in 2000 left Turkey in an awkward position vis-à-vis Israel. The tension between Ankara and Jerusalem regarding the Palestinian issue escalated greatly in late 2008 when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip (as well as during subsequent operations). On a personal level, Erdogan was infuriated by Operation Cast Lead because only days before he was busy conducting shuttle diplomacy toward a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, making him look complicit or clueless.¹⁷ Relations reached their nadir in 2010 after the Israeli military seized the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara* as it

was trying to breach the military blockade of Gaza, which resulted in the deaths of eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American. After the Israeli raid, diplomatic relations were downgraded and often downright hostile for six years until the 2016 normalization agreement.

In addition, Turkey's faltering membership talks with the European Union had largely negative implications for its relations with Israel. First, the reforms demanded by the EU included steps toward democratization, which meant weakening the military's hold on Turkish policy. As such, the forces primarily responsible for propelling Turkish-Israeli relations into the "golden age" lost much of their influence on Turkish politics. Second, the mishaps in the efforts to achieve EU membership caused Turkey to turn away from the West and seek a greater leadership role in the Middle East. In doing so, Ankara saw championing the Palestinian cause as a move that would pay dividends by endearing it to the Arab world.

In the aftermath of the 2016 Turkish-Israeli normalization, cooperation between the two countries much beyond the chilled restoration of full diplomatic relations is unlikely because of numerous limiting factors. First of all, Israel and Turkey maintain different security priorities. The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis remains the greatest threat to Israel's security. In contrast, though Turkey originally worked toward defeat of the "axis of resistance" forces in the Syrian civil war by supporting Syrian rebels groups, this position seems to have softened due to overriding concerns about Kurdish expansionism.¹⁸ While Turkey sees Iran as a regional competitor, it prioritizes the Kurdish question (an interest largely shared with Iran and Syria, with perhaps the exception of strong Turkey-KRG relations; the Kurdish Regional Government is the ruling body of Iraqi Kurdistan). When it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, Israel views them as major security threats while Ankara seems to view them as useful (if occasionally dangerous) conduits to extend its influence. For example, Israel has fought three major campaigns against Hamas over the last decade, while Turkey maintains close ties (as well as ideological kinship) with the Brotherhood offshoot, and as a concession in the 2016 agreement with Israel has only promised to stop it from using Turkish territory to plan and fundraise for terror attacks. Despite Turkey's commitment to exile members of Hamas's military wing, the tension between Israel and Turkey on this issue remains because Ankara has failed to uphold its end of the agreement and Hamas continues to operate freely in Turkey.¹⁹ Similarly,

Israel and Turkey are on different sides of the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sisi regime in Egypt.

Moreover, the influence of the Turkish Armed Forces has declined dramatically in the months since the military's 2016 coup attempt. The purges that immediately followed the attempted overthrow of President Erdogan resulted in the sacking of almost 50 percent of the force's generals (149 out of the 325 were dismissed)²⁰ and decimated the military's senior leadership. In addition to the mass dismissals, the AKP has used the powers granted to it by the declared state of emergency to distribute many of the powers of the Turkish Armed Forces to civilian political appointees.²¹ For example, the commanders of the army, navy, and air force will now report directly to the Minister of Defense rather than the Chief of General Staff. Also, the gendarmerie command and coast guard command will be transferred from the military to the control of the Minister of Interior. As the military was one of the main driving forces behind the close ties with Israel's defense establishment, removing its more experienced leaders and diminishing the remaining officers' independence from the political leadership weakens one past (and potential future) base of support for closer Israel-Turkey cooperation.

Despite the fact that some point to Israel-Turkey economic ties²² as an incentive for improving cooperation, the two countries do not necessarily need strong security or political ties for trade between them to flourish. In the five years that followed the *Mavi Marmara* incident, during which time relations were downgraded, trade between the two countries doubled to \$5.6 billion.²³ To be sure, both countries were unwilling to sign any sort of gas deal for Israeli export to Turkey and then to Europe via Turkey before they reconciled, but even now the gas deal faces many challenges and has yet to materialize. Also, there are two limitations in promoting broader collaboration on gas. First, the gas deal will be signed and executed by private corporations, so it will not demand intensive government-to-government cooperation. Second, the gas deal with Israel is just one element of Turkey's broader attempt to diversify energy resources to prevent it from being overly dependent on any one source – therefore, Israel's leverage over Ankara as an energy supplier will be diluted by other non-Israeli suppliers of energy resources to Turkey.

The US retrenchment and the regional chaos of the Arab Spring created challenges and opportunities for Israel. When interests aligned, Israel seized the opportunity to build ties with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, due

to differing security priorities and the possibility of bolstering commercial cooperation without improving relations in other arenas, there is no clear impetus for Israel and Turkey to move their relationship beyond the recent cold restoration of full relations.

Notes

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