



The Next Big Middle East Conflict? The Turkish-Israeli Rivalry

Howard Eissenstat

Summary

Turkey and Israel — once regional partners and now open rivals — are competing in a Middle East dramatically reshaped by Gaza and the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran. By neutralizing Iran and its proxies, Israel removed the Gulf states' principal rationale for tolerating Israel as a partner. Turkey, by contrast, is increasingly seen as a useful partner by states in the region.

Direct conflict between Turkey and Israel is not imminent — U.S. pressure remains the primary brake — but policymakers should not mistake the current calm for resolution. The underlying competition is structural, the narratives on both sides are hardening, and the risk of miscalculation is real.

The Issue

Even as the wider Middle East is engulfed in the fallout of the US-Israeli war on Iran, there are growing tensions between Israel and Turkey. Israel's attack, in April 2025, on Syrian airbases that the Turkish military had only recently assessed for possible use was an early example of this. During a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu soon thereafter, U.S. President Donald Trump insisted that Netanyahu needed to “work it out” with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Tensions were mitigated, but they remain.

Ankara has come to view Israel as its most immediate regional threat, and with Iranian capacity degraded by U.S.-Israeli military action, Israeli officials increasingly view Turkey as “the next big challenge” to their country's regional dominance. Neither country envisions an immediate conflict, but increased tensions are inevitable as both Turkey and Israel cement their position in the wider region.

Analysis

While Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel in 1949, relations were limited until the 1990s, when a combination of factors, most notably the Oslo Peace Process, lowered the political and diplomatic costs for Ankara to fully embrace Israel as a partner.

The beginning of the Second Intifada and the collapse of the peace process marked a colder phase in Turkish-Israeli relation, but not a break. In part, this is because the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that came to power in 2002 pursued regional outreach through a “zero problems” approach that positioned Turkey as an intermediary in regional conflicts. Continued engagement with Israel also served a broader strategy of reassuring Western partners wary of an Islamist turn under the AKP.

The appearance of continuity broke dramatically in 2009 – 2010, first with a public spat between

Erdoğan and then Prime Minister Shimon Peres at Davos and then with the “Mavi Marmara Incident,” in which a Turkish supported civilian peace flotilla was raided by Israel, killing nine people. Thereafter, relations remained sour. Leaders in both countries found in the other a useful target for nationalist rhetoric aimed at domestic consumption.

Nonetheless, it was Turkey rather than Israel that was regionally isolated for much of the next decade. Its embrace of populist resistance movements during the Arab Uprisings won it a warm reception from Arab publics, but a cold shoulder from most regional governments. Turkey sided with Qatar when it was under Saudi and Emirati pressure; rejected General al-Sisi’s overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. The Saudi’s assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul also sharpened Turkey’s regional isolation. Meanwhile, Israel benefited from Gulf concerns about Iran and, after 2016, the Trump administration’s push for Israeli regional integration, culminating in the Abraham Accords in 2020.

The Gaza conflict – and now the U.S./Israeli war on Iran – have shifted these dynamics in three ways.

First, they intensified tensions between the two countries. Israeli officials were troubled by Turkey’s persistent support for Hamas. Turkish officials, for their part, had long considered Israeli violence against Palestinians genocide. In practice, Turkey spoke loudly but acted cautiously. Under U.S. pressure, Ankara pushed most Hamas personnel out of Turkey. It has recalled its ambassador to Israel, but maintains a heavy diplomatic presence there. It banned all trade and overflight rights since August 2025, but allows Azerbaijani oil to pass through its territory to Israel, accounting for nearly 50% of Israel’s oil imports. Caution has also marked Turkey’s response to the U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran: it has condemned the conflict and warned against any infringement on its sovereignty, but, wary of antagonizing Trump, has remained circumspect in its language.

Second, the rivalry between Israel and Turkey sharpened with the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria

and both countries now maintain troops there. Turkey aims to ensure a stable unitary state under al-Sharaa, while Israel seems determined to limit state consolidation, especially along the Syrian-Israeli border. Turkey is the new Syrian government’s most important military ally, providing arms, intelligence, and technical assistance. Israel, in contrast, launched extensive air strikes immediately after Assad’s fall, dramatically undermining the arsenal available to the new government. While doing little to support the collapsing Kurdish presence in the north, Israel has given clear support to the Druze in the south and, to a lesser degree, Alawites.

To this can be added additional — though less immediate — areas of rivalry. Perhaps the most important is in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Turkey has made some efforts at lowering tensions with Greece and Cyprus, growing military cooperation between Cyprus and Israel, and joint military exercises between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel — such as those held in December 2025 — exacerbate Turkish fears of encirclement. Another example is Israel’s recent recognition of Somaliland, which, while largely symbolic, highlights Israeli desire to cultivate allies in its near abroad and serves as a challenge to Turkey, which has invested heavily in Somalia, including a military base there since 2017. Other areas of friction include Lebanon, where Turkey has shown continued sympathy for Hezbollah, and Yemen and Sudan, where Israel appears to be quietly supporting U.A.E. efforts, while Turkey has backed Saudi-aligned forces.

Third, and most importantly, the wider regional balance has shifted. The U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran and its proxies mitigated the perceived threat Iran posed to Saudi Arabia and the wider region. In effect, Israel is a victim of its own success: by demonstrating the limits of Iranian power, it has reduced its own value to the GCC as a hedge against Iran. The emerging concern is instability and, possibly, a failed state in Iran.

Israel also has undermined its role as a regional partner through the human cost and knock-on effects of its Gaza campaign. Its attack on Hamas leaders residing in Qatar — a U.S. ally — in September 2025 sent shockwaves through the region.

Although relations remain in flux, particularly given the Saudi-Emirati rivalry, status quo powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt are beginning to see Turkey as a potential force for stability and Israel as a loose cannon.

Implications

The rivalry between Israel and Turkey highlights how regional relationships continue to shift. While the two are working at cross-purposes in several arenas, the risk of direct conflict is not immediate. Nonetheless, both have the demonstrated capacity and willingness to project power beyond their borders. Just as importantly, both now see in the other a natural rival, each having developed extensive narratives — often overstated — about the danger posed by the other.

There is little evidence that either Turkey or Israel has much appetite for direct conflict now; but both see in the other a looming threat, raising the danger of miscalculation. The United States plays the vital role of mitigating those risks, but states with ties to both Israel and Turkey — whether in the Middle East or Europe — should be working to reduce these tensions as well. Turkey's NATO membership is an underutilized lever here. For European partners, this will require balancing Greek and Cypriot cooperation with Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean against Turkish fears as well as developing new strategies for restraining Israel, heretofore seen as a natural ally. NATO — and perhaps more importantly the emerging European security architecture — may be important components for facilitating this.

Further Reading

Kiliç Buğra Kanat, "Turkish-Israeli Relations during the Cold War: The Myth of a Long 'Special Relationship.'" *Israel Studies Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter 2016), pp. 130-149

Özlem Tür, "Turkey and Israel in the 2000s — From Cooperation to Conflict," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 45-66

Umut Uzer, "The Impact of Islamist Ideology on Turkish Foreign Policy and Its Casualty: Turkish-Israeli Relations." *Israel Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 2022), pp. 31-57



Takeaways

- Relations between Turkey and Israel have suffered an intensifying downturn since 2009, but not a break.
- The fall of the Assad regime has sharpened these tensions: both countries maintain troops in Syria, pursue incompatible objectives there.
- By degrading Iran and its proxies, Israel it has reduced its value to Gulf states as a hedge against Iranian power.
- Turkey has adopted a pattern of strong rhetoric paired with cautious action. Direct conflict is not imminent, but each side's perception of the other as a looming threat creates a risk of miscalculation. The United States has stepped in to mitigate some of these tensions. Reducing them further should become a European priority as well.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Turkiet och Israel — tidigare regionala partners men nu öppna rivaler — konkurrerar i ett Mellanöstern som i grunden har omformats av Gaza och det USA-israeliska kriget mot Iran. Genom att neutralisera Iran och dess ombud har Israel undanröjt Gulfstaternas främsta skäl att tolerera Israel som partner. Turkiet, däremot, ses i allt högre grad som en användbar partner av länder i regionen.

En direkt konflikt mellan Turkiet och Israel är inte nära förestående — amerikanska påtryckningar utgör fortfarande den främsta bromsen — men beslutsfattare bör inte missta det nuvarande lugnet för en lösning. Den underliggande konkurrensen är strukturell, narrativen på båda sidor hårdnar och risken för felbedömningar är påtaglig.

About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

Director
Paul T Levin

Chief Editor
Jenny White

suits@suits.su.se
[@Stockholm ITS](https://www.su.se/institute-for-turkish-studies/)
<https://www.su.se/institute-for-turkish-studies/>

About the author

Howard Eissenstat is Laurentian Associate Professor of Middle East history and History Department Chair at St. Lawrence University as well as a non-resident scholar at Stockholm University Institute of Turkish Studies (SUITS). Eissenstat's research focuses on the intersection of nationalism, religious identity, and policy in the Turkish Republic. His recent work has focused increasingly on contemporary Turkish domestic and foreign policy, especially on issues of rule-of-law, minority rights, and the reshaping of political culture under the AKP.

The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of SUITS