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## Turkey won't play with Israel

Jerrold Kessel and Pierre Klochendler  
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It's long been among the most durable, strategic relationships in the Near East - perhaps because it was the most unlikely.

For decades, the two regional superpowers, Turkey and Israel, have quietly stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the common strategic challenges facing them.

For the past 20 years, the intriguing involvement between Jewish Israel and Muslim Turkey has been increasingly out in the open, impervious to demands from the Arab world and from hardline elements in Turkey - both Muslim and left-wing - that Turkey should rather distance itself from its elaborate military and intelligence dealings with Israel.

Now it's all changing. Or, is it just a temporary blip?

On Sunday, Israel disclosed that joint North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [air force](#) exercises, codenamed "Anatolian Eagle," had been postponed because Turkey was excluding the Israeli air force. The drill was scheduled to have included the United States and Italy. Both pulled out after the Turkish ban.

The war games were due to have been based in the central Anatolian city of Konya, and were reportedly to have involved bombing runs in airspace near the Iranian, Syrian and Iraqi borders.

"It is wrong to derive a political meaning or conclusion from the postponing of the international part of the exercise," the Turkish Foreign Ministry said in a bland statement.

But, speaking on Sunday night on CNN, Turkish Foreign [Minister](#) Ahmet Davutoglu alluded to the fact that the exclusion of [Israel](#) was linked to lingering anger in Turkey over Israel's unrestrained war on Hamas in Gaza at the beginning of the year.

Davutoglu said, "We hope that the situation in Gaza will be improved, that the situation will be back to the diplomatic track, and that will create a new atmosphere in Turkish-Israeli [relations](#) as well.

"But," he added, "in the existing situation, of course, we are criticizing the Israeli approach."

Turkish fury was rekindled following publication of [the United](#) Nations' Goldstone Report, which alleges that Israel has committed war crimes. Turkish Prime Minister Recip Tayyip Erdogan has been at the forefront in criticizing the decision to shelve discussion of the report at the UN Human Rights Council.

The ban is not the first time Turkey has shown its displeasure publicly with Israel over the Gaza offensive.

In January, Erdogan stormed out of a [conference](#) during the World Economic Forum in Switzerland after he had upbraided Israeli President Shimon Peres over the extent of Palestinian casualties in Gaza, telling him, "You know well how to kill people."

And, last month, Davutoglu canceled a visit to Israel because the Israeli authorities indicated they would not welcome him visiting Gaza on the same trip.

These incidents have compounded the strain which political ties between the two states have been under since the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party was elected to power in 2002.

The leading Turkish daily Hurriyet suggests that the "icy new tone" in relations is unlikely to be relieved any time soon. The war games have been "delayed for an indefinite time", reported the paper, quoting a well-placed Turkish official.

The war games decision came as a major shock to Israel's strategic planners. "This is a seriously worrying development," said former Israeli air force chief Eytan Ben-Eliah on Israeli [Public Television](#). "Turkey is critically essential in the training of our air force over wide spaces, particularly given Turkey's strategic location adjacent to both Iran and Syria."

Two years ago, Israeli bombers are believed to have passed through Turkish air space when they attacked a Syrian nuclear facility under construction.

The two states have enjoyed very close ties on the military plane. They regularly conducted joint naval exercises, intelligence was routinely shared, and weapons trade consolidated following a military cooperation agreement signed in 1996.

Israel has supplied hundreds of [millions of dollars](#) of military equipment to Turkey over the years, and has refurbished Turkish tanks and airplanes.

But over the past year, Turkey began steadily to downgrade the military cooperation while in parallel augmenting such ties with Syria.

Israeli defense officials disclose that even before the abrupt canceling of the air exercise, there were already concerns about the future of arms deals and joint efforts slated to develop specialized weapons systems.

Unofficially, government-run Israeli military industries acknowledge that the export potential to Turkey has been decreasing month by month, with US and European, especially Italian, arms [companies](#) moving in to replace the Israeli firms.

In wake of the initial strong, but panicky, Israeli comments on the scrapping of the [war games](#), a statement by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, "We call on Israeli officials to act with common sense in their statements and attitudes."

The head of the strategic research center at Istanbul Bahcesehir University, Ercan Citioglu, told the Qatar-based al-Jazeera network: "Turkey is the only friendly country with Israel in the region. It has very good relations with Syria and Iran. That's why Israel seeking Turkey's support for Israeli policies in the region should be of vital importance to it."

Privately, some Israeli officials say that Israel should not take the "abrasive shift in Ankara" lying down.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak counseled a cooler head. After a closed-door top-flight discussion at his headquarters in Tel Aviv, Barak said, "In spite of the ups and downs, [Turkey](#) continues to be a central factor in our region. There is no room for getting drawn into fiery statements against them."

But, one senior Israeli official told Inter Press Service frankly, "It may be the reality has already changed, and that the strategic ties that we thought continued to exist with Turkey have simply ended."

At Sunday's weekly cabinet meeting, a former defense minister, Industry Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, said Israel could not afford to take a hard line: "We have an important and strategic set of common interests with Turkey. We must act with the utmost sensitivity so that gloomy forecasts do not materialize."

Reshaping Turkey's attitude seems unlikely, though, without a significant change in Israel's policy vis-a-vis the Palestinians.

The cancelation of Anatolian Eagle leaves a number of other strategic questions unanswered, both on the bilateral and international plane, and also within Turkey and Israel:

- ☐ What are the implications of a Turkey-Israel rift on the international effort to stop Iran's nuclear quest?
- ☐ Does this signal a dramatic change in relations between the Turkish military and the moderate Islamic Administration of the ruling AK party? Until this dramatic decision the military had always carefully shielded its close ties with Israel from being buffeted by mounting government and public anger about the close strategic relationship.
- ☐ Will the Turkish ban on Israel prove to be the first tangible boycott by a country allied with Israel?
- ☐ And, what effect will this have on Israel's obdurate policies with respect to easing their unrelenting pressure on the Palestinians?