

Escalating Turkey-Israel Rivalry: Gaza, Syria, and Other Flashpoints

Avraham Spraragen, J Street Policy and Research Coordinator | SEPTEMBER 22, 2026

Israel recently [appointed](#) a new chargé d'affaires at the Israeli Embassy in Turkey, which remains closed due to regional tensions. Turkey and Israel have clashed over the war in Gaza and in post-Assad Syria, where the two countries are now expanding their military footprint. This escalating rivalry has also played out in the Horn of Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, and it has become a campaign issue ahead of the Israeli election on October 27. While Turkish-Israeli relations deteriorate, Turkey is partnering with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in an attempt to transform the region's security architecture. This issue brief examines the evolution of Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations, Turkey's new defense pact, and the flashpoints between Turkey and Israel in Gaza, Syria, Somalia, Greece, and Cyprus.

Evolving Turkish-Israeli Diplomatic Relations

Turkey and Israel have maintained formal diplomatic relations since 1949, when Turkey became the first Muslim country to recognize the nascent Jewish state. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, included Turkey in his "Alliance of the Periphery" – a strategy designed to defend Israel by aligning with non-Arab regional actors, at a time when Israel was not at peace with any of its Arab neighbors. The two countries historically cooperated on defense, intelligence, and trade. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [visited](#) Israel for the first time in 2005, but Turkish-Israeli relations have since deteriorated. Erdoğan's support for Hamas strained the relationship, which collapsed in 2010 when Israeli troops [killed](#) nine Turkish flotilla activists who attempted to break Israel's blockade of Gaza.

The two countries reconciled in 2016; Israeli President Isaac Herzog [visited](#) Turkey in 2022, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Erdoğan for the [first time](#) at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023. However, just over two weeks later, Hamas carried out the October 7 massacre against Israel, and Turkish-Israeli relations have since reached their lowest point. Turkey [severed](#) economic ties with Israel, closed its airspace to Israel, and banned Israeli ships from Turkish ports over the war in Gaza. Israel [evacuated](#) diplomatic personnel from Turkey after October 7; Turkey [recalled](#) its ambassador from Israel, and the Israeli embassy in Ankara remains [closed](#).

Turkey and Israel Clash Over Gaza

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war, Turkey has [repeatedly accused](#) Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians. In turn, Israel has [repeatedly accused](#) Turkey of committing genocide against the Kurds. Amid this deterioration of bilateral relations, the Israeli government

unanimously [approved](#) a proposal for Israel to officially recognize the genocide against the Armenian people during the final years of the Ottoman Empire (the predecessor to modern Turkey). Israel had refrained from this recognition to protect its relationship with Turkey, which vehemently denies the accusation, and its decision to do so now is ill-timed and clearly intended to provoke Turkey.

After October 7, Erdoğan [defended](#) Hamas, calling it an “organization of liberation” and “not a terror organization.” Erdoğan meets routinely with Hamas officials and provides a safe haven for the group in Turkey. In October 2025, Erdoğan used these Hamas ties to help the U.S. secure the Gaza ceasefire agreement. Initially resistant to the U.S. plan, Hamas relented at Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey’s urging, after which President Trump [praised](#) Erdoğan as a “reliable ally.”

In July 2026, Erdoğan [issued](#) domestic arrest warrants for Netanyahu and is seeking an Interpol red notice for the Israeli prime minister – as part of an ongoing Turkish investigation into allegations that Israeli soldiers [tortured](#) flotilla activists traveling from Turkey who sought to break the Gaza siege.

Turkey and Israel Clash Over Syria

The main Turkish-Israeli clash is taking place in Syria, which sits between Turkey and Israel and is critical for the security of both countries. Since the ouster of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in late 2024, Turkey has filled the power vacuum and increased its military presence in Syria. Ankara has worked closely with the new Syrian President, Ahmed al-Sharaa, while Jerusalem remains wary of him. Citing distrust of al-Sharaa and the threat of cross-border attacks by Islamist militants, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on Syria since the fall of Assad, destroying much of Syria’s military infrastructure.

Seeking a weak and decentralized Syria, Israel continues to occupy sovereign Syrian territory and exploit sectarian divisions. Israel is covertly arming and funding the Druze minority in southern Syria to make it harder for al-Sharaa to maintain control of the region. There is a strong case to be made that this approach runs contrary to Israel’s own security interests – given that al-Sharaa has indicated a willingness to negotiate a [security agreement](#) with Israel. This strategy also puts Israel directly at odds with Turkey, which is seeking a unified and stable Syria, thereby setting Jerusalem and Ankara on a collision course.

During his visit to Damascus earlier this month, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [accused](#) Israel of “destabilizing actions” in Syria that undermine the cause of regional peace. This visit took place shortly after Israel’s August 18 [attack](#) on Abu al-Duhur Airbase in Syria. Israel [claimed](#) that Turkey was on the verge of deploying troops to the airbase, and that the strikes were intended to [prevent](#) “a Turkish military foothold in Syria that threatens Israel.” Turkey and Syria [denied](#) plans for a Turkish troop deployment, but acknowledged that Turkish military

officers had visited Abu al-Duhur several days before the strike for military cooperation purposes. If Turkish troops had been stationed at the airbase when Israel attacked, the targeting of NATO troops could have sparked a major crisis. U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Tom Barrack, [criticized](#) Israel for the “unnecessary escalation that does not advance regional stability.” Barrack also [confirmed](#) that the U.S. is working to establish a deconfliction mechanism, which is sorely needed to prevent a Turkish-Israeli military confrontation in Syria.

Turkey-Israel Flashpoints: Somalia, Greece, and Cyprus

Somalia has become another flashpoint in the rivalry between Turkey and Israel. Turkey is a close ally of Somalia, which it sees as key to solidifying its position as a dominant power along the Red Sea corridor (its largest overseas military base is in Mogadishu) and gaining access to untapped natural resources. Israel is also pursuing a strategic foothold in the Horn of Africa to counter the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and safeguard maritime traffic near the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait. As part of that effort, it became the first country to recognize Somaliland (which seceded from Somalia in 1991) as an independent state last year. Erdoğan [called](#) the recognition “illegitimate and unacceptable.”

Greece and Cyprus have also become flashpoints in the Turkish-Israeli rivalry. As diplomatic relations between Ankara and Jerusalem have deteriorated, Israel has strengthened a trilateral “Hellenic alliance” with Greece and Cyprus – both historical rivals of Turkey, which occupies Northern Cyprus. In 2025, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus [signed](#) a trilateral military cooperation agreement. Last month, Israel [signed](#) a \$3.5 billion air defense deal with Greece. Cyprus has [procured](#) an Israeli air defense system and is now [seeking](#) to procure Israeli tanks. Furthermore, Israeli defense firms are reportedly [planning](#) to open facilities in Cyprus. This collaborative push is intended to counter Turkey’s growing regional dominance and aggressive “[Blue Homeland](#)” maritime doctrine, but has also exacerbated tensions between Israel and Turkey.

Turkey’s Defense Pact with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

On August 7, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan signed the Mecca Joint Defense Pact, [stipulating](#) that “any armed attack against any one of the three states shall be regarded as an attack against them all.” This collective security arrangement is modeled after NATO’s Article 5 and is the first of its kind in the Middle East. Three influential Sunni Muslim U.S. partners signed the pact amid the destabilizing U.S. war against Iran, in which the Islamic Republic has retaliated with strikes on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Turkey has the second-largest military in NATO, Saudi Arabia is a top oil exporter and home to the two holiest sites in Islam, and Pakistan is the only nuclear-armed Muslim country.

The tripartite framework reflects a shared concern over growing regional instability and Israel’s destabilizing military conduct. The latest [escalation](#) between the Houthis in Yemen and Saudi

Arabia is an early test for the alliance. The pact could expand beyond its three founding members and add a critical new dimension to the region's overall security architecture. President Trump [said](#) the alliance "shows how the Middle East is coming together, and how countries will finally be able to defend themselves in a more meaningful way." It also demonstrates that these countries are losing confidence in U.S. security guarantees and are seeking alternative defense arrangements.

Turkey on the Israeli Campaign Trail

Both the pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu camps have made Turkey a campaign issue ahead of next month's Israeli election. Netanyahu and Erdoğan are engaged in a war of words; Netanyahu [called](#) Erdoğan an "antisemitic dictator," and Erdoğan has [compared](#) Netanyahu to Hitler. Netanyahu's Likud party even [featured](#) Erdoğan in a campaign billboard over the Tel Aviv highway.

After Netanyahu's escalatory strikes against Abu al-Duhur Airbase last month, Israeli opposition figure Yair Golan [criticized](#) the attack as a "provocative and dangerous move" that Netanyahu made for political reasons. This would not be the first time that Netanyahu has used a security crisis to his political advantage, rallying his base around a fight that "only Bibi" can win.

For his part, Naftali Bennett, a right-wing former prime minister who is running to replace Netanyahu, has [labeled](#) Turkey "the new Iran," alleging that Erdoğan is creating a "hostile Sunni axis" with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Across the Israeli political divide, a dangerous position appears to be taking hold: that military confrontation with Turkey is inevitable. The parties must urgently de-escalate to prevent this disastrous outcome.