

CHAPTER SIX

**Regional Realities and the
Eastern Mediterranean**





6.1 Prioritize Egypt and Jordan, While Exploring New Horizons in the Arab World



A new balance of power is emerging in the Arab world. At the regional level, several formative factors are at play. Above all, there is the lingering impact of the Arab upheavals that erupted in 2011. Indeed, the basic issues and fundamental problems that sparked the so-called “Arab Spring” persist.

Added to this are growing signs of American fatigue with its long and intensive involvement in the region; Russia’s return as a regional player; Turkey’s rise as a regional power; and Iran’s bid for regional hegemony.

The Arab world’s two most powerful countries, Iraq and Egypt, have seen their regional influence decline significantly. These two historic Arab centers of power are primarily preoccupied today with domestic matters, such as maintaining social, economic and political cohesion. Leadership of the Arab world is now sought by two relatively marginal states: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Both countries bring formidable amounts of money, dedication, focus and connections with Western elites to the table.

Saudi Arabia’s primary campaign is centered on its ongoing struggle against Iran and its Shi’a proxies. The second front of these emerging regional powers is one in which the UAE has a more dominant role. The UAE is engaged in a battle against revolutionary forces in the Arab world and identifies the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its offshoots as the main enemy. This campaign is directed at Qatar and, to some extent, Turkey. The hostility that the UAE displays towards Ankara and Doha is at least partially based on personal and dynastic tensions, as well as geopolitical rivalries.

There is reason to doubt whether the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE (and their junior partner Bahrain) have the experience, knowledge or human capital to fulfill this leadership role successfully. Most of the initiatives and efforts of the two crown princes (and de facto leaders) of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Muhammad Bin Salman and Muhammad Bin Zayid (MBS and MBZ), have not gone well.

Support for the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime faltered; attempts to influence political realities in Lebanon and Libya have failed; plans for the Saudi state oil company Saudi-Aramco to be listed on international stock exchanges have turned out to be more complicated than expected, though



undeniably profitable; and the Khashoggi affair has cast a cloud of suspicion on MBS. Other than in Yemen, where the war has been both deadly and inconclusive, Saudi Arabia has no clear-cut victories against Iran anywhere.

For Israel, this evolving geopolitical situation presents challenges but also offers opportunities. Leaders of Arab countries have a vested interest in maintaining internal stability, and regard Iran and the Sunni jihadist organizations as primary threats to their continued rule. To bolster their respective positions, governments across the Arab world have come to value Israel's military might, its intelligence in dealing with sensitive security issues and its technological acumen. In addition, the declining salience of the Palestinian issue in the international arena partially has removed one key obstacle to better relationships between Arab governments and Israel.

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Additionally, America's ongoing retreat from international entanglements has united regional allies. These alliances have been formed in order to slow down the American withdrawal and contain the damage it may cause to regional stability. American fatigue with foreign involvements also has forced Arab governments to combine their efforts and explore alternative strategic structures that would compensate for the loss of American influence.

Most religiously conservative Arab regimes are reluctant to link up with Iran or Turkey; doing so would be tantamount to de facto acquiescence to these non-Arab nations' regional ambitions. As such, the remaining strategic alliances available to Arab governments are with Russia and Israel. Thus, the majority of these countries' leaders have indeed been seeking to cultivate stronger relationships with both Moscow and Jerusalem.

Still, the Arab Sunni camp is far from being a cohesive unit. Each Arab country has its own national interests, and the united front that is often presented obscures significant differences. For example, Egypt is opposed to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's bid for regional hegemony in the Arab world – occasionally making its displeasure with these regimes known.

A key difference between Egypt and its rivals in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is that Cairo does not regard Iran and the Shi'a as the primary regional antagonist. Rather, the Egyptian government views the Salafi terrorists and Muslim Brotherhood as the main threats. As it emerges from its self-imposed isolation, Egypt will increasingly challenge growing Saudi dominance in the region.

Jordan's position also differs from that of its financial benefactors, particularly when it comes to its stance on the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey. And even among the Gulf States, Oman and Kuwait are not on the same page with Saudi Arabia when it comes to Iran or Qatar.

Accordingly, Israel has an opportunity to improve relations with more Arab countries. Specifically, Israel could conceivably turn Saudi Arabia from a rival into a partner. Indeed, there are ample opportunities for broadening the already existing security and economic links between Jerusalem and Riyadh. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the Saudi Arabian leadership is not stable and may not succeed in reforming the kingdom and reshaping the region.



Therefore, it would be wise for Israel to reduce the visibility of these growing ties to Arab countries. Specifically, Jerusalem should take steps to avoid being portrayed as advocates of the Saudi leadership. Public discussion about the establishment of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, and repetition of the fact that the Palestinian issue has been eclipsed in favor of normalization with Israel, only hampers the development of Israel-Arab ties, and may even force some of these Arab countries to adopt less friendly stances.

The strengthening of relations with the Gulf Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, should be a long-term priority for Israel, but Jerusalem should continue to put a premium on its relations with Jordan and Egypt.

Establishing a basis for strengthening the relationship with Gulf Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, should be a long-term priority for Israel. The common geopolitical and economic interests shared by Israel and many Arab countries should be deepened and relations should not have to rely on the strong links they presently share with the Trump administration.

Such relations should not be based on a triangular relationship that might wither once the political dynamics in Washington change. Israel has no interest in allowing its developing relationships with Arab governments to become a hot-button issue in the increasingly polarized American political discourse.

In addition, it is worth keeping in mind that the establishment of formal relations would not be the primary benefit to Israel. As significant as such an achievement would be, the impact of normalizing relations with Arab governments on Israel could potentially be much broader, stretching from Asia to Africa and Latin America. This is because countries that choose to upgrade their relations with Israel no longer have to worry about the consequence of deteriorating economic relations with influential Gulf states. In many ways, this has been the situation already for the last few years.

Whichever direction relations between Israel and the Arab world develop, Israel's priorities must remain clear. To date, Israel has two strategic partners in the Arab world who signed peace treaties: Egypt and Jordan. Both Cairo and Amman have proven their strategic worth to Israel since they signed their respective treaties. Egypt and Jordan remain vital to maintaining security along Israel's longest borders.

Both Egypt and Jordan are suspicious of Israel's overtures to the Gulf States. The governments in Cairo and Amman do not want to be left behind as the regional geopolitical axis starts to tilt toward the Gulf. Despite the potentially historic benefits of normalization, the Israeli government should continue to put a premium on its relations with Egypt and Jordan. Specifically, Israel should assist the governments in Cairo and Amman whenever feasible and avoid getting embroiled in unnecessary crises – even if this means making concessions on sensitive matters.

Relatedly, the proposed conflict management strategy that Israel should pursue regarding the Palestinians has a dual benefit. By lowering tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, conflict management enables a strengthening of ties between Arab countries and Jerusalem. This makes it easier for Cairo and Amman to maintain their cooperation with Israel.



6.2 Exact a Price for Turkish Hostility



Over the last few years, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has destroyed Turkey's system of checks and balances. Today, Erdogan effectively controls his country's political apparatus. He has facilitated an intense process of Islamization in Turkey. As a result, a growing rift has opened between Ankara and the West, while Turkey's attitude towards Israel has become increasingly belligerent.

Turkey under Erdogan's rule has taken an increasingly active role in regional affairs. The Turkish military in northern Syria and northern Iraq seeks to impact the course of events in both countries. Specifically, Erdogan is adamantly opposed to the emergence of a Kurdish state.

Ankara is also escalating tensions with Greece around the Aegean Sea. Turkish forces are disrupting energy exploration efforts taking place in the Greek Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and Turkish ships have been carrying out exploratory work there. The Turkish government asserts that it has shared sovereignty over the island's maritime territories.

Another expression of Erdogan's regional ambition is the establishment of Turkish military bases in Qatar, Somalia and Sudan. In addition, Turkey refuses to cooperate with the US government regarding economic sanctions against Iran. Erdogan welcomes the slow-motion retreat of the US from the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

With regards to Israel, Erdogan has taken a confrontational stance that often verges on anti-Semitism. Indeed, Turkey uses every international forum as an opportunity to lash out at Israel. Under Erdogan, Ankara has positioned itself as the protector of the Palestinians and Islamic holy places in Jerusalem.

The Turkish government's policy towards Israel is a component of Erdogan's wider agenda: the realization of a regional neo-Ottoman order. This distinctly Islamist vision is closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, Turkey supports Hamas rule in Gaza. Erdogan and his AKP look upon Hamas as a sister party, an outgrowth of the Brotherhood.



Another reason for heightened tensions between Jerusalem and Ankara is Turkey's bid to increase its political and religious influence in Jerusalem (as discussed above, in chapter 4). Ankara showers financial support on the Palestinians. In recent years, Turkey has aided in the reconstruction of homes and established soup kitchens in Jerusalem. These efforts are being facilitated both indirectly, through the NGOs that Ankara sponsors, and directly, through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), that reports to the Prime Minister's office.

Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs ("Diyanet") plays a major role in organizing tourist missions to Jerusalem. Some of these excursions are funded by Ankara to increase the Turkish Muslim presence on the Temple Mount. These tours also visit Samuel's Tomb, the Cave of the Patriarchs and David's Tomb, with the aim of turning them into Muslim pilgrimage sites. This brand of tourism is specifically designed to expand Turkey's sphere of influence into Jerusalem's holy places.

Meanwhile, increased energy cooperation between Israel, Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Italy, Jordan and the PA is perceived by Ankara as nothing more than an attempt to create an anti-Turkish alliance. This has raised tensions between the Turkish government and these countries.

One of Israel's chief diplomatic levers is its ability to hamper Turkish interests via Washington, specifically in the US Congress.

Yet despite its aggressive line towards Israel, Ankara continues to have low-level diplomatic relations with Jerusalem. One reason for this is the Turkish government's need to maintain access to Israel's holy sites. Moreover, trade relations between the two countries continue to develop, with Turkey enjoying a trade surplus with Israel. The Port of Haifa is vital to Turkey's trade with Jordan and other parts of the Arab world. Finally, the frequency of flights to Istanbul from Tel Aviv is of great economic value to the Turks.

Despite these mitigating circumstances, Israel should continue to monitor Turkey's ambitious military buildup. Special attention should be paid to Turkey's rapidly growing military industries, specifically its plan to upgrade its naval presence in the Mediterranean navy (the MILGEM project). This national warship program aims to build a modern littoral combat ship with anti-submarine warfare and high-seas patrol capabilities, extensively using the principles of stealth technology in its design.

Over the long term, it is also necessary to track Turkish progress in the area of nuclear technology. This assessment is based on a series of developments: Turkey's acquisition of nuclear power plants and official government statements that indicate an interest in obtaining uranium, or even developing a nuclear weapons capability.

Israel must maintain sufficient diplomatic and military capacity to deal with Turkey's growing involvement in the region. One of Israel's chief diplomatic levers is its ability to hamper Turkish interests via Washington, specifically in the US Congress. One example of this leverage is the cancellation of the F-35 deal between the US and Turkey. As tensions unfold, there are ways to focus US pressures on other aspects of Turkish behavior in the region, beyond its problematic acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system.



On the military front, Israel should strengthen its naval capabilities to maintain an acceptable balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean, and not just because of Turkey.

Israel should seek to maintain relations with Turkey even while Erdogan is in power.

Turkey is a powerful Muslim country that is strategically located. As such, Israel should seek to maintain relations with it even while Erdogan is in power. After all, only Turkey can be a viable regional counterweight to Iran. For this reason, Israeli responses to alarming statements from Turkey must distinguish between the Turkish people and Erdogan. Indeed, recent municipal election results revealed that across Turkey there are many voices that dissent from the policies of the country's president.

Israel should cultivate and sustain robust relations with key figures outside of Erdogan's ruling elite who are not hostile toward the Jewish state. One reason to pursue all possible channels is the (dwindling) Jewish community inside Turkey, whose well-being is an ongoing humanitarian concern.



6.3 Promote a Common Agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean



The summits held in Beersheba in December 2018 and Jerusalem in March 2019 were the fifth and sixth tripartite gatherings of the leaders of Israel, Greece and Cyprus. These meetings mark a further upgrading of an emerging alliance. A permanent secretariat of the three countries is being established in Nicosia, to coordinate a widening range of tripartite activities and meetings at various ministerial and professional levels. The secretariat will promote integration in the fields of energy, environmental protection, technology, responses to natural disasters, and more.

The Jerusalem summit was joined by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, thus granting the Trump administration's seal of approval to the strategic ties emerging in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel has a key interest in solidifying and broadening this partnership, as it facilitates the strategic change taking place in Israel's international and regional standing.

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Meanwhile, a parallel integration initiative pertaining to Egypt, Greece and Cyprus has been formed. These interlocking building blocks indicate movement towards the creation of a new security architecture in the eastern Mediterranean.

In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was formed by the energy ministers of Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. (Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi openly admitted at that summit that Egypt cooperates with Israel in fighting terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula.)



There is reason to believe that the EMGF, with or without the PA, can evolve into a forum whose operational parameters go well beyond specific energy issues. A model like the 5+5 grouping in the western Mediterranean is a distinct possibility.

Building on this integration momentum, Israel's gas exports should be integrated with those of Egypt and Cyprus, either via a pipeline to Europe (through Greece and Italy) or through LNG facilities in Egypt and/or Cyprus.

Meanwhile, Turkey's neo-Ottoman and Islamist posturing and the regional ambitions of President Erdogan are bringing together the other countries in the region. Ankara's overt hostility towards Israel and the Egyptian regime, Turkey's threat to prevent Cyprus from using its gas fields and repeated hints about re-igniting the territorial dispute in the Aegean Sea with Greece that had been addressed in the Treaty of Lausanne – all drive the other countries in the region together.

Egypt has long viewed Turkey as a regional rival. But the tensions between Cairo and Ankara have ratcheted up significantly due to Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

For Israel and its Mediterranean allies, it is crucial that Egypt remain stable. This is a widely held sentiment, despite the fact that in Brussels and the US Congress there are voices calling for the slashing of aid, due to the repressive nature of Sisi's regime.

The growing interdependence and friendship that Israel is developing with Greece and Cyprus is important to Israel. As member states of the EU, the two are well positioned to keep Israel informed about trends and developments in European policy. Greece and Cyprus can also be useful to Israel when it comes to matters in Brussels, where policy decisions need to be enacted by consensus.

The new alignment in the eastern Mediterranean is also leading to closer military ties, including multinational military exercises. IAF squadrons are now training in Greece. IDF Special Forces have trained in Cyprus's mountainous regions.

Israel should provide the resources and manpower required to manage the Nicosia secretariat and the functions of the EMGF; broaden the scope of joint military exercises, integrating American forces whenever possible; increase public awareness in the region and around the world of the importance of regional cooperation; and promote the concept of a "Mediterranean identity" that can supplement or even replace the "Middle Eastern" identity, which is rooted in past colonial perspectives.

As discussed above, Israel needs to take steps to prevent a further deterioration of its relationship with Turkey. The prospect of future cooperation and even integration should be considered, but only if Ankara's Islamist stance softens. At the same time, it is of special value for Israel to increase cooperation with both Jordan and Egypt and explore avenues in which Jerusalem can contribute to the stability of the governments in Amman and Cairo.

Israel can also view issues related to Gaza, and specifically the Gaza Marine natural gas field, from a broader eastern Mediterranean perspective. Even in Gaza, there are practical ways for Israel to neutralize Turkish ambitions and strengthen the impact of Egypt and the other partners in the emerging regional realignment.

At the same time, Israeli assets in the Mediterranean such as natural gas drilling platforms require protection (by air and naval forces) against Hamas, Hezbollah and even Turkish aggression. As such, the Israeli navy must be upgraded to effectively counter emerging threats.