The Turkish Exception: NATO, Strategic Impunity, and Israel's Eastern Mediterranean Dilemma

Emmanuel Navon / 9 July 2026

Executive Summary

The 2026 NATO summit in Ankara has exposed a growing contradiction inside the Western alliance. Turkey has become more hostile toward Israel, more assertive in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, more permissive toward Hamas, and more extreme in its rhetoric against Israel. Yet Ankara continues to benefit from NATO protection, European caution, and renewed American interest in restoring defense ties, including a possible return to the F-35 program.

At the same time, what can now be described as a "Turkish threat" is not comparable to the Iranian one. Iran is a revolutionary enemy outside the Western alliance; Turkey is a revisionist power operating from within it. This makes the Turkish challenge less direct, but more complex. Ankara's military weight, defense industry, geographic position, and leverage over Russia policy, migration, Syria, and the Black Sea have created what may be called the Turkish exception: Turkey can violate Western expectations while continuing to enjoy the privileges of an indispensable ally.

Skip to content ation with Greece and Cyprus is essential, but insufficient. The erranean triangle strengthens Israel's deterrence, energy resilience, air and naval coordination, and diplomatic position inside Europe. Yet it cannot by

itself address the main sources of Turkish leverage: Washington, NATO, Syria, Hamas networks, and Western defense-industrial policy. It should therefore be treated as one pillar of a broader strategy, not as a substitute for one.

The central policy challenge is to acknowledge Turkey's strategic value to NATO without allowing that value to become a license for hostile or destabilizing conduct. Turkey matters to NATO, Europe, and the United States. Precisely for that reason, alliance privilege must come with alliance discipline.

This paper therefore recommends that Israel adopt a strategy of disciplined containment toward Turkey. Israel should neither seek confrontation with Ankara nor acquiesce in Turkey's strategic impunity. Instead, it should work systematically to limit Turkey's ability to exploit NATO membership, Western defense ties, regional leverage, and diplomatic ambiguity in ways that harm Israeli and Western interests. This strategy should rest on five pillars: opposing any Turkish return to the F-35 program unless the S-400 issue is resolved in a verifiable and irreversible manner; exposing Hamas networks operating from Turkish territory and pressing for sanctions against them; deepening the Israel-Greece-Cyprus partnership as an Eastern Mediterranean shield; preserving deconfliction channels with Turkey in Syria; and framing the Turkish challenge in Washington and European capitals as a test of NATO discipline, Western counterterrorism standards, and alliance credibility.

Introduction

The NATO summit that took place in Ankara on July 7–8, 2026, came at a moment of unprecedented tension between Turkey and Israel. Formally, the summit focused on defense investment, industrial production, support for Ukraine, and alliance cohesion. Strategically, however, it exposed a deeper contradiction: one of NATO's most important members is also one of its most problematic, and its leverage inside

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reasingly shields conduct that undermines Western and Israeli

Turkey's importance to NATO is real. It controls access between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It has the alliance's second-largest military. It has developed a significant defense industry, including combat drones that have changed battlefield dynamics from Ukraine to the Caucasus. It sits at the intersection of Russia, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean. No serious Western strategy toward Russia, Syria, migration, or Black Sea security can ignore Ankara.

Yet Turkey has increasingly converted its importance to NATO into a license for impunity. Turkey has purchased Russia's S-400 air-defense system, supported Hamas, expanded its military occupation in Syria, intimidated Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, aligned with Qatar and Pakistan, repaired relations with Egypt, and repeatedly accused Israel of crimes in inciteful language.

The question is not whether Turkey should be treated as Iran. It should not. The question is whether Turkey can be allowed to behave as a revisionist power while enjoying the privileges of an allied one. That is the central contradiction now confronting Israel, Europe, and the United States.

From Periphery Ally to Strategic Challenger

The deterioration of Israel-Turkey relations is historically striking because Turkey was once a pillar of Israel's original "periphery strategy." In the late 1950s, David Ben-Gurion sought to break Israel's regional isolation by building strategic ties with non-Arab states on the Middle Eastern periphery, especially Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. The logic was simple: Israel was at war with the Arab world, and the United States was not yet willing to treat Israel as a strategic ally. It therefore had to cultivate partnerships with non-Arab powers threatened by Soviet influence and Arab nationalism.

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[illegible] that strategy was significant. Ankara and Jerusalem shared [illegible]t Soviet penetration, Nasserist radicalism, Syria, and regional instability. In 1958, Ben-Gurion met secretly with Turkish Prime Minister Adnan

Menderes, and Israeli, Turkish, and Iranian intelligence services later established the “Trident” framework for regular cooperation. Israel and Turkey again converged in the 1990s, establishing full diplomatic relations in 1992 and signing defense cooperation agreements in 1996.

Yet the relationship was never free of contradictions. Turkey’s Muslim identity, its need for support in international forums, the Cyprus issue, and its sensitivity to Arab and Islamic opinion repeatedly limited the relationship. The strategic shift became far more profound after the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party in 2002. Under Erdoğan, Turkey’s foreign policy moved away from the older secular, pro-Western, anti-Iranian framework and toward a neo-Ottoman, Islamist-nationalist regional posture.

This did not make Turkey identical to Iran. But it did reverse the strategic logic that once underpinned Israeli-Turkish cooperation. Israel’s old periphery strategy was designed to bypass the hostile Arab core by working with Turkey and Iran. Today, Israel’s new periphery strategy increasingly seeks to manage threats emanating from both Iran and Turkey, while cooperation with Arab states in the Gulf and beyond.

Why Turkey Gets Away with It

Turkey’s ability to escape Western criticism rests on five main factors.

First, Turkey is geographically indispensable. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Western governments have become more reluctant to confront Ankara over Erdoğan’s repression at home and expansionism abroad. Western governments, which increasingly view Turkey as a bulwark against Russian aggression on NATO’s southeastern flank, have avoided public criticism of Turkey’s authoritarianism, choosing instead to strengthen security ties with a major regional and arms exporter.

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Second, Europe's weakness amplifies Turkey's leverage. After decades of underinvestment in defense, many European governments view Turkey not as a problematic ally to be disciplined, but as a military actor they cannot afford to alienate. This is particularly true amid concerns over Russia, migration, and the Black Sea. The result is a widening gap between Europe's rhetorical commitment to values and its practical reluctance to challenge Ankara. The Ankara summit reinforced this dynamic by placing defense production and industrial capacity at the center of NATO's agenda. In that context, Turkey's growing arms industry, drone exports, and military geography make allies even more reluctant to treat Ankara as a problem to be disciplined rather than as a capacity to be harnessed.

Third, the United States increasingly treats Turkey transactionally. After Ankara acquired Russia's S-400 air-defense system, Washington removed Turkey from the F-35 program and, in December 2020, imposed sanctions under U.S. law on Turkey's official defense-procurement body, the Presidency of Defense Industries. This government body oversees Turkey's major defense acquisitions and defense-industrial programs. The sanctions restricted its access to U.S. defense technology and included asset freezes and visa restrictions on senior Turkish defense officials. Yet the Trump administration is now moving toward lifting sanctions and reconsidering Turkey's access to the F-35.

Fourth, Turkey operates in ambiguity. It is authoritarian but still holds elections. It is a NATO member but maintains functional ties with Russia. It opposes Israel but has not formally severed diplomatic relations. It supports Hamas but also mediates in regional diplomacy. It threatens Greece and Cyprus but remains embedded in Western institutions. This ambiguity allows governments to postpone hard choices.

Fifth, Israel's international standing has been weakened by the Gaza war, global polarization, and hostility toward the Netanyahu government. Western governments that are quick to criticize Israeli ministers have been far more cautious toward Turkey. This double standard became especially visible after Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan described Israel as a "burden that humanity can no longer

Skip to content s not ordinary diplomatic excess. It was genocidal language. By portraying the Jewish state as an intolerable burden on humanity, Fidan borrowed

from the vocabulary of Nazi and other genocidal propaganda, in which Jews are first dehumanized as a collective problem before their removal is normalized. Israel was therefore right to describe his words as incitement to genocide. The statement is all the more alarming because Fidan is not a marginal figure. A former intelligence chief and one of Erdoğan's possible successors, he is viewed in Israel as a particularly dangerous actor. The fact that such language can be used by the foreign minister of a NATO member without a coordinated allied response is itself evidence of the Turkish exception.

Turkey Is Not Iran — and That Is the Problem

Turkey, however, is not Iran.

Iran is a revolutionary theocracy that seeks Israel's destruction, arms proxy forces on Israel's borders, pursues regional hegemony, and has long advanced a military nuclear program. Its hostility is ideological, institutional, and military. It operates outside the Western alliance and is openly treated as an adversary by the United States and much of Europe.

Turkey is different. It does not currently pursue Israel's destruction through a direct military campaign. It does not run a Shiite-style proxy ring around Israel. It maintains diplomatic relations, however degraded. It calculates costs, especially in relation to Washington. It also remains connected to Western markets, institutions, defense industries, and alliance structures. Erdoğan's Turkey is a strategic challenge for Israel but not an enemy of the Iranian type.

Yet precisely because Turkey is not Iran, it may be harder to handle. Iran can be deterred, sanctioned, isolated, and confronted as an enemy. Turkey resists such treatment because it is formally an ally of Israel's main ally. It is inside NATO. It has veto power within the alliance. It can block initiatives. It can mediate with America's [illegible] can bargain over migration, Russia, Syria, and defense production. It

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[illegible]rael rhetorically while claiming that it remains committed to regional diplomacy.

Turkey's challenge is therefore not one of open enmity but of hybrid rivalry: a NATO-based power whose regional conduct increasingly undermines Western and Israeli interests, but whose formal status shields it from the consequences normally attached to such behavior.

Hamas, Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the F-35

Turkey's support for Hamas remains the most immediate Israeli security concern. Ankara has long hosted Hamas figures and treated the organization as a legitimate political actor rather than as a terrorist movement responsible for the October 7 massacre. Israel continues to uncover West Bank terror networks directed by Hamas operatives based in Turkey. These networks have been associated with Zaher Jabarin, a senior Hamas figure based in Istanbul who helped build the organization's military infrastructure in the West Bank, was released in the 2011 Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, and later became one of Hamas's key financial and operational officials abroad.

This issue should be central to any Israeli and Western policy toward Turkey. The problem is not merely rhetorical sympathy for the Palestinians. It is the use of Turkish territory and political cover by an organization at war with Israel. NATO allies would not tolerate similar permissiveness toward jihadist networks targeting European capitals. They should not tolerate it toward Israel.

Syria is the most dangerous potential theater of Israeli-Turkish friction. Turkey seeks influence over the post-Assad order and wants a stronger Syrian state capable of securing its borders, limiting Kurdish autonomy, and restoring Turkish regional depth. Israel, by contrast, has an interest in preventing hostile military consolidation in Syria, preserving freedom of action, and stopping Iranian, Hezbollah, or jihadist assets from reconstituting near its borders. Turkish and Israeli spheres of influence in Syria now coexist uneasily: Turkey in the north, Israel in the

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ıflicting visions for the future of the Syrian state.

Israel should maintain operational freedom in Syria while preserving intelligence and military channels with Ankara to prevent accidents. Turkey's conduct in Syria must be watched closely, but it should not become the arena in which Israel turns a difficult strategic rivalry into an unnecessary war.

The Eastern Mediterranean is where Israel's answer to Turkey has been most coherent. Over the past decade, Israel has deepened cooperation with Greece and Cyprus in energy, intelligence, air exercises, naval coordination, and infrastructure security. This trilateral framework reflects a convergence of interests: all three countries are concerned by Turkey's maritime claims, military assertiveness, and attempts to impose its "Blue Homeland" doctrine — Ankara's expansive vision of Turkish power and maritime rights across the Aegean, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea.

Turkey views the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alignment with suspicion, especially when it involves offshore gas, electricity interconnectors, and maritime security. The Great Sea Interconnector project, designed to link Israel, Cyprus, and Greece to the European electricity grid, has strategic implications beyond civilian infrastructure. It could provide Israel with energy redundancy and deepen its integration with Europe. Ankara's warnings against Greek and Cypriot cooperation with Israel show that Turkey understands the strategic significance of infrastructure. The Eastern Mediterranean triangle is therefore essential. It gives Israel strategic depth, European access, and regional partners directly exposed to Turkish pressure. But it remains a shield, not a full strategy.

The F-35 issue could turn the Turkish challenge from a political and regional problem into a major military concern. Turkey's acquisition of Russia's S-400 system led to its removal from the F-35 program and to U.S. sanctions. The original logic was clear: a NATO ally could not simultaneously host an advanced Russian air-defense system and gain access to the West's most advanced stealth fighter. That concern was not only bilateral. It involved NATO security, Russian intelligence risk. and the integrity of the F-35 system.

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Reversing this policy without a verifiable and irreversible resolution of the S-400 issue would be a major strategic mistake. It would signal that a NATO member can

purchase major Russian military systems, wait out the consequences, and return to privileged access through political bargaining. It would also weaken Israel's qualitative military edge, especially if Turkey's anti-Israel trajectory continues.

The issue should not be framed only as an Israeli concern, but also as a Western one. If NATO wants to maintain technological security and defense-industrial trust, it cannot separate Turkey's F-35 eligibility from its Russian defense ties, its support for Hamas, its occupation in Syria, and its enmity toward Israel.

The Eastern Mediterranean Shield Is Necessary but Insufficient

Israel's cooperation with Greece and Cyprus is one of the most successful examples of its new periphery diplomacy. It compensates for the collapse of the old Israel-Turkey partnership, strengthens Israel's regional position, and creates a pro-Western democratic alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This partnership should be deepened. It should include more frequent air and naval exercises, joint protection of offshore energy infrastructure, coordinated cyber-defense of electricity and gas systems, intelligence sharing on Turkish-backed Islamist networks, and diplomatic coordination in Brussels and Washington. Greece and Cyprus are not substitutes for American power, but they are important force multipliers.

Still, the partnership has limits.

It cannot decide whether Washington sells F-35s to Turkey. It cannot force NATO to discipline Ankara. It cannot remove Hamas networks from Turkish soil. It cannot determine the future of Syria. It cannot by itself prevent Turkey from using migration, trade, and defense production as leverage over Europe.

Israel must therefore avoid a strategic illusion: replacing Turkey with Greece and

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enough. The purpose of the trilateral framework is not to create an anti-Turkish bloc for its own sake. It is to build deterrence, resilience, and European integration while leaving room for deconfliction with Ankara where possible.

A wise Israeli strategy should combine containment and communication. It should strengthen the Eastern Mediterranean alignment, oppose the F-35 sale under current conditions, expose Turkey's Hamas links, and preserve channels to prevent accidental escalation in Syria.

Policy Recommendations

Israel should internationalize the Turkey challenge without making it sound like a bilateral grievance. The strongest argument in Washington and Europe is not that Turkey is hostile to Israel. It is that Turkey's conduct undermines NATO discipline, Western defense security, counterterrorism standards, and Eastern Mediterranean stability.

Israel should make the F-35 issue a matter of U.S. law, NATO security, and qualitative military edge. The argument should focus on the S-400, Russian access risks, Turkey's strategic behavior, and the dangerous precedent of rewarding noncompliance.

Israel should deepen cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, but also expand the framework to include France, Italy, and moderate Arab partners where possible. Israel should present the Eastern Mediterranean as a practical arena for joint action on energy infrastructure, maritime security, military coordination, and protection against Turkish coercion.

Israel should intensify intelligence exposure of Hamas networks operating from Turkey. Every credible case should be documented, shared with allies, and translated into sanctions proposals. The Hamas file is the clearest way to turn Turkey's conduct from an "Israeli complaint" into a Western counterterrorism issue.

Israel should maintain deconfliction channels with Turkey in Syria. A military accident between Israeli and Turkish forces would serve neither country's interests

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The United States should not readmit Turkey into the F-35 program unless the S-400 issue is resolved in a verifiable, irreversible, and legally compliant manner. Temporary storage, symbolic non-use, or relocation without strategic guarantees are not enough.

Congress should treat the F-35 issue as a test case for alliance discipline and technology security. Any pathway for Turkey should remain blocked unless the S-400 issue is resolved in a verifiable, irreversible, and legally compliant manner, and unless Ankara's broader conduct — including on Hamas, Syria, Iran sanctions, and anti-Israel incitement — is addressed as part of the strategic assessment.

NATO should reaffirm that membership involves more than geography and military assets. NATO membership must require more than military assets and geography; it must require allies to protect shared technology, avoid empowering hostile powers, and respect the security of other members and democratic partners.Turkey's importance should not exempt it from scrutiny.

European governments should stop treating Turkey's behavior as an unavoidable price of regional stability. Silence encourages Ankara to conclude that pressure works and that alliance dependency can be exploited indefinitely.

Europe should support Eastern Mediterranean resilience by backing energy interconnectors, maritime security cooperation, and infrastructure protection involving Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. Finally, European governments should condemn Turkey's dehumanizing rhetoric against Israel and against the Jewish people. Selective outrage damages Europe's credibility and encourages further escalation.

Conclusion

Precisely because Turkey is not the new Iran, it represents a more complex

Skip to content stands outside the Western alliance and can be confronted as an

enemy. Turkey stands inside the alliance and exploits the privileges of belonging to it while increasingly violating the spirit of that alliance.

This is the Turkish exception. It allows Ankara to purchase Russian weapons, pressure democratic partners in the Eastern Mediterranean, host or tolerate Hamas activity, deepen its Syrian footprint, intimidate Greece and Cyprus, and use dehumanizing rhetoric against Israel — all this while remaining shielded by NATO indispensability and Western caution.

Israel must respond with clarity but not recklessness. A broad confrontation with Turkey is not inevitable, nor would it serve Israel's interests while Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and regional instability remain urgent threats. But ignoring Turkey's trajectory would be equally dangerous.

The correct strategy is neither appeasement nor escalation. It is disciplined containment: strengthen the Eastern Mediterranean partnership, protect Israel's qualitative military edge, expose Hamas networks, preserve operational freedom in Syria, and make the Turkey question a Western alliance issue rather than an Israeli-Turkish quarrel.

The issue is no longer Turkey's behavior alone. It is the willingness of NATO and Western governments to excuse that behavior because Turkey is useful. If alliance membership becomes a shield against accountability, NATO will send a dangerous message: that a member state may buy Russian weapons, enable terrorist networks, threaten democratic partners, and use genocidal language against Israel while still enjoying the full benefits of Western protection. That message will not be heard only in Ankara. It will be heard in Moscow, Tehran, Beijing, and every capital testing the limits of Western resolve.

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Ambassador of Israel to Japan