

HOW ISRAEL'S FORMER ALLIES BECAME ITS FOREMOST ENEMIES, AND VICE VERSA

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Where Israel once aligned with Turkey and Iran against the Arab states, it now finds itself aligned with those former enemies against Turkey and Iran.

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The announcement in the summer of 2020 that Israel was normalizing relations with the United Arab Emirates heralded a dramatic shift in Middle Eastern diplomacy. When Bahrain joined in quick succession, followed a little later by Sudan and then Morocco, it became clear that Arab governments would no longer give Palestinian leaders a veto over their policy toward the Jewish state. Yet as much as the Abraham Accords marked a sea change, they were also an extension of a diplomatic “periphery strategy” Israel first embraced in the late 1950s. This continuity becomes clear if we see the latest advances in peacemaking in the broader context of the Jewish state’s geopolitical role in the region over the past seven decades.



The Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara* arrives at Istanbul’s Sarayburnu port as people wave Turkish and Palestinian flags on December 26, 2010. MUSTAFA OZER/AFP via Getty Images.

I. The “Old Periphery”

For Israel’s diplomats, 1958 was a dark year. Israel’s most formidable and hostile neighbors, Egypt and Syria, merged into a “United Arab Republic” led by Gamal Abdel Nasser under the banner of his Arab nationalist ideology. That same year, Charles de Gaulle returned to power in France, which was at the time Israel’s only true ally in the full sense of the word, and its primary supplier of arms. De Gaulle immediately downgraded military and intelligence

cooperation with Jerusalem. Meanwhile, a coup overthrew the Iraqi monarchy, opening the door to further Nasserist and Soviet influence. Israel felt increasingly threatened. So did other non-Arab Middle East countries, first and foremost Iran and Turkey.

To David Ben-Gurion, serving in his second stint as prime minister, the confluence of events put the Jewish state in an untenable diplomatic situation. The U.S.-Israel alliance had not yet taken shape; nor was it possible for Israel to join the Soviet bloc. To break the isolation, Ben-Gurion, Reuven Shiloah (head of Mossad between 1949 and 1953), and Shiloah's successor Isser Harel devised the "periphery strategy." The idea was to bypass the hostile Arab Middle East by building military ties with the anti-Soviet and non-Arab regimes on the edges of the Middle East—Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia—as well as with minorities such as the Kurds of northern Iraq and the Christians of Lebanon and southern Sudan.

By the end of 1958, the Mossad, Savak, and SNST (Iran and Turkey's respective intelligence agencies) had begun holding trilateral meetings every six months, an alliance code-named Trident. El Al Airlines began flying to Tehran, and the Shah's personal guards were equipped with Israel's iconic Uzi submachine gun. By the mid-1970s there were about 500 Israeli representatives and businessmen living in Teheran, not including their families; the city even had a school for Israeli children.

The two countries cooperated to support Iraqi Kurds, with the IDF training and advising Kurdish rebels in the northern part of the country. By so doing, Jerusalem and Tehran succeeded in tying down the Iraqi army, which had fought against Israel in 1948 and continued to threaten both Israel's eastern front and Iran's western border. In exchange, the Kurds helped get Iraqi Jews out of the country, smuggling them from Iraqi Kurdistan into Iran, where Israeli emissaries would aid them in making *aliyah*.

Despite those close relations with the Kurds, then as now the implacable enemies of Ankara, Israel was able to add Turkey to its periphery. A Muslim country, Turkey had voted against the partition of Palestine in 1947. At the same time, the Turks never quite forgave the Arabs for their role in breaking up the Ottoman empire during World War I. Turkey aligned itself with the U.S. in the cold war, allying itself with pro-Western Iran and Iraq. But the Nasser-backed coup in Iraq and the union between Egypt and Syria in 1958 weakened its regional position. Furthermore, Turkey's conflict with Syria—over territory, water resources, and Syria's support for the Kurdish rebels in eastern Turkey, all of which continue to be factors today—provided yet another incentive for rapprochement with Israel.

Threatened by Soviet subversion and Nasserist pan-Arabism, including Nasser's demand that it cede the Alexandretta province to Syria, Turkey was eager to upgrade its intelligence cooperation with Israel. Moreover, the Turks thought that cooperating with Israel would help activate the pro-Israel lobby in Washington against the hostile Greek and Armenian lobbies.

In 1959, there were even talks of a joint Israeli-Turkish military operation against Syria, but the idea was eventually dropped.

With the 1979 Islamic revolution, Israel lost its Iranian ally, and moved even closer to Turkey. The newly created Islamic Republic of Iran officially labeled Israel a "Satan" and openly challenged the secular model on which modern Turkey was founded. Moreover, the ayatollahs supported the regime of Hafez al-Assad in Syria, which—besides its hostility

toward the Jewish state—was even more deeply embroiled in conflict with Turkey than its predecessors. After the end of the cold war, both Jerusalem and Ankara shared new concerns over Iran’s increasing influence in the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The two countries thus established full diplomatic relations in 1992, and four years later signed two military cooperation agreements. Although much had changed since the era of Trident, the two country’s interests still aligned, or so it appeared.

II. The Collapse of the Old Periphery

The 1979 revolution in Iran was a major blow to Israel. Besides being a bulwark against Soviet influence, Iran had previously provided Israel with approximately 60 percent of its oil. But despite the ayatollahs’ heated anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric, the countries maintained clandestine relations. The Islamic Republic, involved in a costly war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, continued to buy arms secretly from Israel, while the latter was happy to help in the fight against a common enemy. In 1984, when Ariel Sharon publicly admitted to the backdoor military relationship, Israeli arms sales to Iran reportedly amounted to \$500 million.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, and the blow dealt to Saddam Hussein’s army in the 1991 Gulf War, whatever reasons there were for behind-the-scenes cooperation between Jerusalem and Tehran evaporated. In fact, the two countries now became sworn enemies, because of Iran’s nuclear program, its support for anti-Israel militias such as Hizballah in Lebanon, and its direct involvement in [terror attacks](#) against Jewish targets.

Turkey too has become a regional adversary. In 2002, the Islamist Justice and Development Party won the general election. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, changed the course of traditional Turkish policies, both domestically and internationally. In 2003, he rejected a U.S. request to use Turkey’s territory to invade Iraq from the north, and ever since relations between Ankara and Washington have been slowly deteriorating, despite the efforts of both Presidents Obama and Trump to patch things up.

In June 2004, Erdogan accused Israel of “state terrorism” after the killing of then-Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The year after, Turkey normalized its relations with Syria. Erdogan then hosted Hamas’s politburo chief, Khaled Mashal, in Ankara in 2006; since then Turkey has become one of the terrorist group’s major sponsors. In October 2009, Erdogan cancelled Israel’s participation in the multinational “Anatolian Eagle” exercise and paid an official visit to Iran. As a Turkish diplomat admitted candidly to an Israeli audience: “We don’t need you anymore. . . . There is no more USSR, no more Arab subversion.” Indeed, Erdogan jailed most of the Turkish army and intelligence officers who had upgraded relations with Israel in the 1990s.

After the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident—when a ship bearing armed activists sailed from Turkey to try to break the blockade of Gaza—Erdogan became even more open in his antagonism toward the Jewish state. In 2013, he declared Zionism a “crime against humanity” and blamed Israel for the military coup in Egypt. And as Turkey grew more hostile to its

former ally, it grew increasingly friendly with Iran, its erstwhile foe. Its UN representative voted against imposing tougher sanctions on the Islamic Republic in 2010. That same year Erdogan appointed a pro-Iranian candidate to run the country's spy agency, who, three years later, revealed the identity of ten Israeli secret agents to Iran—an unprecedented act of intelligence betrayal.

III. The New Periphery

Israel thus finds itself with its position completely reversed from what it was when Ben-Gurion first implemented the periphery strategy. Its former allies, Iran and Turkey, have become its foremost regional adversaries. Once its primary foe, Egypt has become a regional partner, while Iraq and Syria are only dangerous only insofar as they are platforms for Iranian aggression. But, paradoxically, Israel's periphery strategy has not vanished.

Instead, Jerusalem has redefined what the periphery is. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf, increasingly concerned by Iran's hegemonic ambitions, nuclear program, and destabilizing policies, have come to see in Israel an irreplaceable ally. The change was already apparent in November 2015, when the United Arab Emirates hosted an Israeli diplomatic mission. Even more surprising were reports of behind-the-scenes cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which intensified after Mohammad bin Salman was appointed crown prince in June 2017. In November of that year, the IDF's chief of staff declared: "There is complete agreement between us and Saudi Arabia."

The normalization agreements, known as the Abraham Accords, that Israel signed in August 2020 with the UAE and Bahrain, made official the realignment of the Jewish state and Gulf states against Iran. Saudi Arabia has yet to give such formal sanction to its security and intelligence relationship with Israel, but that relationship is hardly a secret. This development is itself revolutionary: Saudi Arabia, after all, had convinced President Roosevelt in 1945 that he should prevent the establishment of a Jewish state, and in 1973 it spearheaded the oil embargo aimed at isolating Israel.

But oil is no longer the powerful economic and geopolitical weapon that Saudi Arabia could wield to such effect in the 1970s. Prices have declined steadily since 2011, and the petroleum-based economy of many Arab states is no longer sustainable. Painfully aware of this situation, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is trying to diversify the Saudi economy—an effort, he believes, that requires the sort of technological innovation that Israel has become famous for.

The Gulf states are not, of course, on the periphery of the Middle East in the strict geographic or ethnolinguistic sense that Turkey and Iran are. But they are peripheral to Israel's local conflicts, which are with Palestinian terror groups in the West Bank and Gaza, and with Hizballah and other Iranian proxies in Lebanon and Syria. The Arab-Israeli conflict of Ben-Gurion's day is no more; it has been replaced by the Israel-Palestinian conflict, one in which the Gulf states have no geopolitical investment, at least not in realpolitik terms.

But then as now, Israel's new periphery also includes other non-Arab states just beyond the Middle East: namely, Greece, Cyprus, and Azerbaijan. Relations between Jerusalem and

Athens were long nonexistent or even tense, especially at the height of Israel's alliance with Turkey, Greece's historic rival. But the changing world of the energy market has made a difference here as well—not to mention the two countries' increasing concern over Erdogan's antics.

In June 2017, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus—which likewise has tense relations with Ankara—announced their planned cooperation in the construction of a pipeline linking the three countries that could deliver natural gas to the EU. Cyprus has its own large offshore gas field, Aphrodite, while Israel has Tamar and Leviathan; together, the two nations can become a mega gas exporter. For Greece, the prospect of becoming a transit point for the export of eastern Mediterranean gas to the European continent is a welcome and much-needed means of strengthening its weak economy. The proposed underwater pipeline would be the world's longest at 1,367 miles, is supposed to be completed by 2025 (although many experts believe that date overly optimistic), and would take natural gas from Israel and Cyprus via Greece to Italy, whence it could be shipped throughout the EU. And this new partnership is by no means limited to energy exports: security cooperation among the three countries has increased dramatically, including a \$5.4 billion deal for the supply of an Israeli flight-simulation center for the Hellenic Air Force.

Energy has also strengthened the older alliance between Israel and Egypt, a scenario that was unthinkable when the country was ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 and 2013. Although Egypt's Zohr offshore gas field is larger than Israel's Leviathan, it is insufficient for the needs of the country's 95 million inhabitants. Thus in 2018 an agreement was concluded for Egypt to import Israeli natural gas. Plans are also in the works for Egypt to process Israeli gas at its liquefaction plants, an arrangement that would benefit both countries.

In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was established among Israel, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, formalizing a new energy partnership that serves two geopolitical interests shared by Israel and the United States: curtailing Russian domination of the European energy market and creating a bulwark against Iran in the eastern Mediterranean. The addition of the UAE to EMGF in December 2020 confirmed that Israel's new periphery extends from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, and constitutes an alliance against Iran and Turkey.

Erdogan, meanwhile, has been trying, so far unsuccessfully, to undermine the new natural-gas partnership in the Mediterranean by building an alternative one with and Libya. Yet Erdogan's meddling in Libya—which extends far beyond attempts to exploit its energy reserves—has encouraged resentment, especially in the eastern part of the country, known as Cyrenaica. With Libya's descent into chaos and civil war, a growing Cyrenaican independence movement, hostile to Turkey, has emerged; some of its leaders have even approached American and Israeli diplomats and opinion-makers in their search for international support. An independent Cyrenaica would be a natural candidate for joining the East Med partnership.

While a breakup of Libya might create a new regional partner for Israel, the breakup of Sudan in 2011 produced an unexpected change in Israel's approach to that country. Originally, the Christians of southern Sudan were part of Israel's periphery strategy against the oppressive regime and hostile government of Khartoum, which in 1958 took up a strong Nasserist line, and later moved in an Islamist direction. Thus Israel welcomed the independence of South

Sudan in 2011. Yet South Sudan soon turned into a failed state with little to offer strategically. Sudan, however, experienced a revolution and, desperate to see U.S. sanctions lifted, agreed in October 2020 to establish relations with Israel and to join the Abraham Accords. Here too, Israel's periphery strategy persists, simply in mirror-image form.

The last major player in Israel's new periphery is Azerbaijan, which until 1991 was simply part of the hostile Soviet Union. Besides its importance as a major oil exporter, Azerbaijan shares with Israel a common enmity towards Iran. A secular, predominately Shiite Muslim country, Azerbaijan dislikes the ayatollahs' attempts to spread their extremist doctrines, but even more it resents their support for Armenia, with which it has a long-running territorial dispute. Baku, thanks to its extensive fossil-fuel reserves, has never feared the economic clout of Iran or the Arab petrostates. Threatened by Armenia to its west, Iran to its south, and Russia to its north, it has been an eager importer of Israeli military technology, and is likely also a base for Israeli espionage against Iran.

Of course, there are complicating factors. During the last round of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Israel was criticized for its support for the latter, and even tried to distance itself somewhat. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is growing ever closer to Turkey, bound by related languages and interconnected histories. Whether Baku will be a bridge between Jerusalem and Ankara, or will ultimately be forced to choose, or will simply go on as an anomalous ally of both—only time will tell. Politics still makes strange bedfellows.

In the late 1950s Israel initiated a periphery strategy meant to create alliances with the non-Arab and anti-Soviet states of the wider Middle East. Israel thus cultivated strategic ties with Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia, as well as such non-state groups as the Iraqi Kurds. This system of alliances gradually fell apart following the Marxist coup in Ethiopia in 1974, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey in 2002.

The situation has since then reversed almost completely. Whereas Israel once aligned with Turkey and Iran against the Arab states, led by Egypt, it now finds itself aligned with its former Arab enemies—Egypt, the Gulf states, and Jordan—against Iran and Turkey. Yet the underlying concept of a periphery strategy remains as relevant as ever. Jerusalem has worked hard to develop ties with non-Arab states such as Azerbaijan, Greece, and Cyprus, and with African states such as Sudan. Were Libya to break apart, Cyrenaica could possibly join the East Med partnership spearheaded by Israel to counter Erdogan's imperialism. And if Iran succeeds in creating a sphere of influence that stretches through Iraq into Syria and Lebanon, flanked by Yemen to the south, Israel's new network of peripheral alliances would more or less encircle it, the way Israel once sought to encircle its Arab enemies with non-Arab allies. The circumstances have changed, but the basic wisdom of Ben-Gurion's strategy remains.