CATS Centre for Applied Turkey Studies NETWORK

PERSPECTIVES

22.09.2026

What does the emerging Turkey–Israel rivalry mean for regional security, and what are its implications for European and US policy towards the region?

Over the last three years, Turkey–Israel relations have been marked by escalating tensions and strategic competition that is playing out in different theatres. These dynamics have been most pronounced in Syria, where Turkey's expanding political and military influence collides with Israel's security interests. Frictions are not merely rhetorical. Recent Israeli strikes against the runway of the Abu al-Duhur air base in the province of Idlib, based on Israel's allegation of Turkish military presence, which Ankara and Damascus denied, have highlighted the risk of direct confrontation. Washington has sought to contain tensions by facilitating contacts and exploring security arrangements involving Israel, Syria and potentially Turkey.

Beyond Syria, the rivalry intersects with a wider pattern of regional alignments. Israel has deepened its strategic and military cooperation with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, while Turkey has strengthened its security and defence ties with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. While these partnerships do not constitute fixed opposing blocs, they illustrate how Turkish-Israeli competition is becoming part of a broader reconfiguration of the regional security landscape.

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, The Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Athens

The vicissitudes of Israeli-Turkish relations have been closely followed in Greece. In fact, the sharp decline of Israeli-Turkish relations since the late 2000s has emerged as a rare opportunity for Greece to upgrade its hitherto neglected bilateral relations with Israel. Defence and security cooperation has expanded and gone deeper, and talks about a strategic partnership between Israel and Greece are increasingly common, although the meaning and implications of such a partnership remain underexplained. On the other hand, the Greek government has been keen on stressing that the upgrade of Greek-Israeli security relations is not aimed against Turkey but pursues regional stability and cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the development of trilateral cooperation schemes including Cyprus, Greece and Israel was noted with concern by some Ankara circles, as they seemed to reinforce long-standing Turkish fears about encirclement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece's support for Israeli positions in European and international fora has become harder to sustain following the recent initiatives of the Netanyahu government, the events in Gaza and the attack against Iran. Finding a balance between protecting the new Greek-Israeli relationship and not harming the 'calm waters' in Greek-Turkish bilateral relations is a key objective of

Athens, which has stated that the advancement of Greek-Israeli relations does not imply that Greece will be a party to the Israeli-Turkish rivalry.

Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

The emerging Turkey-Israel rivalry presents a particular challenge for Germany. Germany's historical responsibility and its commitment to Israel's security as part of its Staatsräson give relations with Israel a unique political significance. At the same time, Germany and Turkey are bound by long-standing economic, security and societal ties, including a large population of Turkish origin in Germany. Turkey's military weight, geographic position and role in NATO have made Ankara increasingly indispensable to European security. An escalating confrontation between the two would therefore affect core German interests on several levels.

Syria represents the most immediate risk of military escalation. Germany has an interest in supporting US-led deconfliction efforts and more durable security arrangements involving Turkey, Israel and Syria. The Eastern Mediterranean is another potential arena of friction, as Israel's deepening strategic cooperation with Greece and Cyprus has heightened Ankara's security concerns. This matters particularly for Germany, which has assumed a mediating role during periods of Greek-Turkish escalation and would likely be expected to contribute again.

Rather than responding only once tensions escalate, Berlin should urgently develop, together with its European partners, a strategy for preventing Turkish-Israeli confrontation, identifying likely escalation scenarios and channels for deconfliction Washington remains the only external actor with sufficient leverage over both sides to contain a military escalation. Germany and its European partners should therefore focus on supporting US-led efforts while developing a complementary crisis-management role.

Constantinos Adamides, University of Nicosia, Cyprus

While Syria remains the immediate hotspot in the Turkey-Israel rivalry, there are implications that extend directly to Cyprus. Turkey's attempts at enhanced regional influence create a fertile ground for deeper and wider security realignments in which Nicosia appears to calculate it can acquire greater strategic relevance.

For Nicosia, the most important development is the deepening of Israel's defence and security cooperation with Greece and Cyprus. This ongoing trilateral relationship provides Cyprus with opportunities to strengthen defence cooperation, intelligence exchanges and military interoperability. Cyprus appears careful, however, not to position itself as part of Israel's tension with Turkey.

Indeed, there is no strong evidence that Israel and Turkey presently regard Cyprus itself as an operational theatre of their confrontation.

More broadly, interstate tensions rarely remain entirely insulated from the wider regional security environment. Closer alignment with Israel therefore carries risks, and any confrontation between Israel and Turkey could place Cyprus geographically and politically closer to that 'fault line'.

Accordingly, Cyprus' interest is in strengthening its regional partnerships, without defining them through an anti-Turkish lens. The country's strategic value lies primarily in its ability to function as a stable EU member state, a regional security partner and, more importantly, a diplomatic bridge between the EU and the wider Eastern Mediterranean. Ultimately, managing the Turkey–Israel rivalry requires a careful balance between deterrence, strategic cooperation and preserving channels for regional dialogue.

Dorothée Schmid, French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), Paris

The bilateral climate between France and Turkey remains quite cold, as other major players with a stake in Mediterranean stability are aware. As middle powers active in the same geographical areas, France and Turkey have developed a strategic rivalry which brought them to the brink of confrontation off Libya in 2020, with repercussions within NATO and a strategic rapprochement between France, Greece and Cyprus, that further strained relations with Ankara.

At the same time, France has recently taken diplomatic stances including an initiative to recognise the Palestinian state, varying degrees of condemnation of alleged war crimes in Gaza and partial sanctions against extremists in the West Bank. Yet even amid exchanges of insults, France cannot afford to enter into an open diplomatic confrontation with Jerusalem.

Paris's calculations may therefore pose a problem in the event of a direct or indirect confrontation between Turkey and Israel. The strengthening of military ties between Athens, Nicosia and Jerusalem this year further consolidated Turkey's narrative of a structured threat, of which Paris is part, so France hopes the Greek-Turkish dispute does not become fully entangled with the Turkish-Israeli rivalry. Developments in the Iran war complicate the picture: when Iran-linked drones targeted military installations on Cyprus in early March 2026, President Macron was at the forefront in expressing support for the Republic of Cyprus, an EU member state – a move that greatly irritated the Turks.

France's historic mandates in the Levant, its defence commitments in the Eastern Mediterranean, its stance on Palestine and its ambitions in Syria are all driven by logics that no longer align.

Gallia Lindenstrauss, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv

Once a source of stability in the Middle East, Turkish-Israeli relations have become a point of instability in their own right. This is a concerning shift, which adds to the already very volatile situation in the Middle East. While one factor currently easing tension is a wait-and-see approach until the Israeli elections on October 27th, these elections might not bring about the hoped-for relaxation, since the current Israeli government is leaving a very difficult situation for the next government. Also, the heightened sense of threat and the proactive defence strategy are likely to remain part of the strategic thinking of Israel's defence establishment. Still, the Syrian front, which has proven to be currently the most problematic front in Turkish-Israeli relations, is actually the simpler one to solve among the other fronts Israel is involved in. Because Turkey and Israel appear unable to de-escalate without outside help, it is vital that Europe and the US assist them in easing tensions. This can be done by pointing out areas where Turkish-Israeli interests not only do not directly collide, but also where cooperation expands the pie, such as the possible construction of special status industrial zones in Southern Syria.

Galip Dalay, Chatham House, London

The rivalry between Turkey and Israel, sharpened by personal and electoral factors, is increasingly structural and likely to define the region's new geopolitics. Once centred on the Palestinian issue, Turkish discontent is now driven by competing security interests, geopolitical objectives and contrasting visions of regional order. Both actors increasingly diverge on alliances and connectivity. The Mecca Pact, formed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, represents a post-Abrahamic Middle East, while Israel deepens ties with Greece, Cyprus, the UAE and India.

Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean remain the main flashpoints. Turkey wants a centralised, capable Syria; Israel prefers one weak and fragmented, at odds with the wider regional and international consensus. Deepening Israel-Greece-Cyprus cooperation, including the Achilles Shield initiative, is intensifying rivalry dynamics with Turkey, but this time without an Arab component, reflecting Israel's isolation and Turkey's improving Arab ties.

The Eastern Mediterranean matters because it straddles the geopolitics of Middle East and Europe, with direct security implications for both. Syria's return will feature more prominently in discussions of the Eastern Mediterranean.
Hopes that a post-Netanyahu government might ease tensions look overstated, given the rivalry's structural drivers. Given the US's close ties with both sides, it could help de-escalate tensions. Yet a deconfliction mechanism existed before Israel struck the Abu al-Duhur airbase without forewarning Turkey or the US,

underscoring how fragile such channels remain and how uninterested the current Israeli government is in them.

The idea of a regional order premised on Arab-Israeli normalisation and cooperation under the US security umbrella has largely run its course. What follows need not be anti-Israel, but is unlikely to be as Israel-centric. Regional geopolitical shifts are set to push Turkey and the Arab states closer, as evidenced by the Mecca Pact, which enjoys broader regional acceptance and legitimacy than Israeli- or Iranian-centric ideas of the regional order.

Alan Makovsky, Center for American Progress (CAP), Washington, D.C.

As the failure of the bilateral deconfliction mechanism reportedly established in Baku in April 2025 suggests, the US needs to do a more effective job of managing Turkish-Israeli tensions. Following the August 18 Israeli attack on Abu al-Duhur, Tom Barrack announced he would try to set up a trilateral Turkish-Israeli-Syrian mechanism to avert the next crisis. To this point, no progress has been announced on that effort.

The best option is for an active diplomatic intervention by Washington, an ally of both Israel and Turkey and with significant leverage over both, to conduct talks that definitively, if privately, establish "rules of the game" – something that seems not to have happened in Baku. A senior US diplomat should then remain in constant communication with both sides; in fact, the US would probably have to be "on the line" for all communications, while also maintaining separate private lines of communication with each side.

It's not clear that the US is open to such an intrusive role, and, in any case, it wouldn't be easy to reconcile clashing interests. At a minimum, Israel would insist on the right to use its established Syrian air corridor to Iran on demand, without interference from Turkey or Syria. Ankara would insist on greater mobility in Syria and more support for Syria's military development, currently opposed by Israel.

The contributions to CATS Network Perspectives (CNP) reflect the views of the authors.