

## Turkish-Israeli confrontation in the context of the NATO strategy

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On January 7, 2025, *The Jerusalem Post* acknowledged about a report prepared by the *Nagel Committee* (Defense Budget and Security Strategy Analysis Commission, established in 2024) for the Israeli government. The report states that the confrontation between Israel and Turkey is inevitable, and Tel Aviv urgently needs to increase its defense budget and the supply of high-tech weapons to the army. The *Nagel Committee* warns that Ankara's plans to restore the Ottoman Empire threaten Israel's security, and this threat may be even more palpable than the Iranian factor.

In turn, on December 30, 2024, the administration of the Turkish president once again announced that Ankara had severed all ties with Israel. The statement was made in response to the information spread in the Israeli media the day before that Erdogan had allegedly tried to establish contacts with the Israeli government and the IDF to discuss Syrian issues. Several experts suggest that Ankara did definitely try to negotiate with Tel Aviv on the Syrian agenda in confidential manner, but Israel refused the contact and deliberately publicized the information about Ankara's request in the media. This caused a wave of outrage in Turkey, forcing Ankara to actually sever all the ties with the Jewish state. If in the recent past R. Erdogan and his allies in the Republican Alliance were constantly threatening Israel with war and the capture of Jerusalem, while avoiding the topic of the growing volume of shadow trade with the Jewish state, now, apparently, they will have to resort to a complete termination of the cooperation.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already announced that he is taking the *Nagel Committee* report into account and is ready to be guided by it: *“We are witnessing fundamental changes in the Middle East. Iran has long been our biggest threat, but new forces are emerging, and we must be ready for surprises. This report is a ‘road map’ for securing Israel’s future”*. Thus, Tel Aviv has identified a new priority in its defense policy related to the threat posed by Turkey. In the current realities, the supply of Turkish steel for Israel's military-industrial complex and fuel for its army becomes nonsense, as this, in essence, would contribute to the “anti-Turkish militarization” of the Jewish state.

One of the “delicate” aspects of the Turkish-Israeli escalation is the fact that Turkey is considered a key NATO member, while Israel is actually the main non-aligned ally of the North Atlantic Alliance. And if Washington fails to defuse relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv and prevent their direct confrontation, as has happened repeatedly in the past, the Alliance will face the threat of disintegration or, at best, the need for reorganization. Problems within NATO structures have long brought this organization to a crisis point, but it is the Turkish-Israeli war that could become the trigger for the collapse of the entire system of the North Atlantic Alliance and the political and legal foundations of its functioning.

The military-political bloc, created to contain the USSR has successfully integrated its “southern flank” into the strategic region of the Middle East and effectively counteracted the

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 14.01.2025.

“Sovietization” of the Arab World, thanks to the close cooperation between Turkey and Israel.

The Turkish military-political elite, nurtured by Kemalist ideology and acting under the patronage of the US and other significant members of the bloc, maintained close relations with the Jewish state. Turkey was one of the first countries to welcome the creation of Israel and recognize its independence and sovereignty. It interacted with Tel Aviv both bilaterally and within the framework of NATO's doctrine of providing comprehensive support to its “main non-aligned ally”. The friendly relations between the parties were not even affected by the “Cyprus Crisis” of 1974, which changed the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean and marked the first major “crack” in the Alliance in the form of the Greek-Turkish contradictions. As long as the USSR existed and as long as the Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi “*dictatorships*” and the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran were considered by the West as threats to its interests in the Middle East, NATO actively supported the “Turkish-Israeli friendship”. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and later with the rise to power in Turkey of ideologies alternative to Kemalism, Turkish-Israeli relations began to cool down, reflecting their differing views on the future of the region and Ankara's ambitious efforts to achieve greater independence from the US and NATO in matters of Middle Eastern reorganization.

The trend of Turkish-Israeli estrangement accelerated significantly after the economic boom in Turkey in the 2000s, made possible by the AKP party's liberalization of monetary and economic policies. R. Erdogan and his associates felt solid ground under their feet to rehabilitate Pan-Turkist ideas and Neo-Ottoman revisionism, which fundamentally contradicts the US-Israeli doctrine of the “New Middle East.”

Three main events are considered to have contributed to Tel Aviv's change of attitude towards Turkey and its exclusion from the list of Israel's geostrategic allies. The first was Turkey's refusal in 2003 to allow its territory to be used for the invasion of Saddam Hussein's anti-Israel Iraq by US-British forces. The second was R. Erdogan's statement that Turkey “*under no circumstances*” will allow its territory to be used for a strike by the US-Israeli coalition against Iran. The third was Ankara's political (and not only) interference in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its comprehensive lobbying for the “two-state” principle. In the latter case, Tel Aviv regarded Turkey's position not as an attempt by Ankara to increase its influence on this track within the framework of internationally accepted norms, but as a desire to prepare the ground for the future implementation of the policy of “imperial revisionism”.

In this context, the provocative incident in May 2010 with the so-called “Freedom Flotilla”, led by the Turkish ship “Mavi Marmara”, became a decisive signal for Tel Aviv. After the incident, the relations between Turkey and Israel sharply deteriorated, and the main ally of both sides in NATO – the US – was unable to normalize them. In 2010, and then in 2013, 2015, and 2016, under Washington's pressure, the parties alternately tried to defuse the conflict, but each time it ended in another scandal and the withdrawal of the ambassadors.

The last attempt to resolve the contradictions took place in March 2022, when Israeli president Isaac Herzog, after meeting with his Turkish counterpart Recep Erdogan in

Ankara, stated that they had managed to reach an understanding and that from now on Israel and Turkey “*will be friends again*”. However, after the tragic events in Israel in October 2023 and the Israeli forces’ offensive on Gaza, Turkey once again rejected the normalization of relations and radicalized its rhetoric against the “*Zionist state*”. As the operation in Gaza and then in Lebanon progressed, the political and diplomatic confrontation between the parties only intensified until the recent events in Syria finally put an end to the attempts of their common allies to bring the parties together again. It should be particularly noted that the latest statement by B. Netanyahu regarding the adopted new “road map” for the military containment of Turkey is fundamentally different in significance and content from Erdogan's purely rhetorical passages about the “*capture of Jerusalem*” and the “*return of Palestine to the fold of the Turkish history*”. It refers to Israel's adoption of a program to prepare for war with its former ally Turkey, which for the first time in the history of the Jewish state has been designated by its top official as the “*threat number one*”, thus pushing aside the “*traditionally hostile*” Iran.

In essence, we are talking about an unprecedented situation for NATO and its locomotive in the form of the United States, which face the risk of losing control over the emerging new geopolitical arrangements on the southern flank of the North Atlantic Alliance. Even an indirect confrontation between Ankara and Tel Aviv will present Brussels with a dilemma: either deny Israel the traditional unconditional support or initiate the process of stripping Turkey of its membership in the Alliance. Otherwise, the very existence of the bloc will be in question. It is possible that Tel Aviv, with the support of its closest NATO partners, is aggravating the situation to achieve a consensus among the Alliance members on the issue of revising the “*toxic Turkish membership*”.

There is an opinion that Israel has indeed been trying to take Turkey's place in the North Atlantic Alliance over the past decades, while Ankara, in turn, has fiercely resisted these plans. However, the struggle was mainly conducted behind the scenes of the bloc, and many of its details are unknown to the general public. Officially, Israel has never applied for NATO membership, which has not prevented it from benefiting from a wide range of gratuitous assistance from the Alliance. NATO's assistance to the Jewish state began immediately after the establishment of this defensive organization in 1949. Israel was founded only a year earlier and, in terms of time, has a more solid experience of interaction with the North Atlantic Alliance than Turkey, which became a NATO member in 1952.

Since 1990s, NATO-Israel relations acquired a more systematic character and were consolidated by a number of strategic agreements. In 1994, Israel, along with Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, became a participant in NATO's global program “Mediterranean Dialogue”. In 1999, the US government signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” with Tel Aviv, obliging Washington to provide Israel with military assistance worth billions of US dollars annually. In exchange, the United States established its military bases on the Israeli territory. In 2016, a Permanent NATO Mission was opened in Israel, and soon the Jewish state officially received the status of one of the key allies of the alliance, without being a member of it.

In practice, Israel was so deeply integrated into the system of the bloc that many members of the organization repeatedly raised the question of overcoming the final formality

and officially include the Jewish state in the Alliance. For example, in 2006, Italian defense minister Antonio Martino urged the organization to “*immediately open the doors*” to Israel, citing the threat of its direct confrontation with Iran. In April 2023, former US President D. Trump's adviser John Bolton also proposed that the non-aligned allies — Israel, Japan, and Australia — be granted membership in the organization, thus practically bringing this discourse into the open in Brussels.

However, the camp of opponents of this idea within the alliance also consistently advanced its own line, mainly referring to Article 5 of the NATO Charter in the context of the problematic issue of Israel's internationally recognized borders and the fact that Tel Aviv already enjoys unlimited military-political support from the bloc. In 2006, NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, responding to an appeal by the Italian minister A. Martino, stated that the issue of Israel's membership in the bloc was not on the agenda, and the possibility of granting it was “*not even discussed*”. In 2018, commenting on the possibility of an attack by Iran on Israel, then-acting NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also made it clear that the prospects for including the Jewish state in NATO were vague, as was the possibility of continuing comprehensive support for Tel Aviv: “*Israel is our partner but not a NATO member. The security guarantee under Article 5 of the bloc does not extend to Israel. NATO has not and is not involved in the peace process in the Middle East, nor in military clashes in the region. This is not our task*”.

According to *Politico*, many NATO countries allegedly opposed Israel's membership solely because of the Article 5 of the Charter, which, considering Israel's border problems with Lebanon and Syria, as well as the unresolved Palestinian issue, initially excluded the possibility of Tel Aviv's joining the organization. Formally, this is true. However, it is worth assuming that the real reasons for opposing Israel's attempts to become a bloc member lay in a slightly different plane. In particular, Turkey, fiercely resisting Israel's attempts to take its exclusive place on NATO's southern flank had an opportunity after 2007 to prove its indispensability to the Alliance. This was related to Russia's new course of distancing itself from the West and the emerging conflict of interests between Russia and the West in the Eastern Europe (Ukraine and the South Caucasus). In this context, Turkey's role for the mobilization alliance has again sharply increased, accordingly making its voice more significant in the possible restructuring of the organization. On the other hand, the “Nuclear Deal” (JCPOA) with Iran initiated by the B. Obama administration in 2015 significantly eased the situation around the Iranian problem, reducing the necessity of urgently admitting Israel to NATO.

Given these circumstances, Ankara began to pursue a firmer policy behind the scenes of NATO and confidently promote its views on the future of the organization and its policy. An example of such behavior was the issue of admitting Sweden and Finland to the organization, which Ankara pushed for, in order to obtain new preferences from Brussels and, mainly, from Washington. It is clear that under such conditions, achieving Israeli membership would be an insurmountable task.

However, in the light of the new trends in the world in general and in the Middle East region, the situation shows tendencies towards radical change. The newly elected US president D. Trump demonstrates determination during his second term to sharply change

the US global strategy and to build a new configuration of relations in the world. As it is known, D. Trump is a supporter of NATO transformation and an advocate of de-escalating relations with Russia on the Ukrainian issue. He also takes a distinctly pro-Israel stance and seeks to “*complete the task*” of eliminating the theocratic regime in Iran. Given these factors, it can be assumed that Ankara is facing the prospect of losing its key positions in NATO and, consequently, in the Middle East region, in contrast to Israel, which the new US administration considers a more important partner and ally than “*many other NATO allies*”.

It is quite likely that in anticipation of these changes, Israel is showing increasing confidence and expressing its readiness to enter into open confrontation with Turkey. The latter, for its part, is demonstrating signs of concern, and is increasingly stating that it is ready for a direct invasion of Syria and Iraq, which are particularly important for the interests of Tel Aviv and Washington.

According to several Israeli experts, the likelihood of a direct confrontation between Israel and Turkey is now higher than ever. And if this happens, they say, the main members of the North Atlantic Alliance, including the US, will side with Israel, contrary to the organization's charter, while the rest will choose a neutral position. This will be a paradox, but it is likely that this paradox will serve as a convenient pretext for D. Trump to dismantle the current structure of the bloc and transform it into something more suitable for implementing new US global plans without Turkey and other “*inconvenient members*”. So, Ankara has every reason to believe that Turkey will be given much less space in these global plans than it has occupied until now.