



# Could Turkish-Palestinian Security Cooperation Lead to a Maritime Deal?

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# Introduction

**O**n June 3, a security cooperation agreement originally signed in October 2018 between Turkey and the Palestinian Authority came into effect. Titled "The Security Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the State of Palestine" the agreement entered into force almost three years after being signed. This represents the latest phase of Turkey's growing cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in the aftermath of the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Some experts have interpreted the cooperation deal

as an antecedent for a maritime agreement between the two sides, similar to the agreement on the delimitation of Turkey's maritime boundaries with Libya signed in November 2019. This info pack explores the Turkish-Palestinian security cooperation agreement and its significance as an indication of Ankara's increasing presence in Palestinian politics. Following a brief account of Turkey's relations with the Palestinian Authority, the security cooperation agreement and potential challenges for its implementation will be examined. Finally, an assessment of a potential maritime agreement will be made.



Deputy Foreign Minister of Sedat Onal (L) meets his Egyptian counterpart Hamdi Sanad Loza (R) in Cairo, Egypt on May 05, 2021.  
(Stringer - Anadolu Agency)

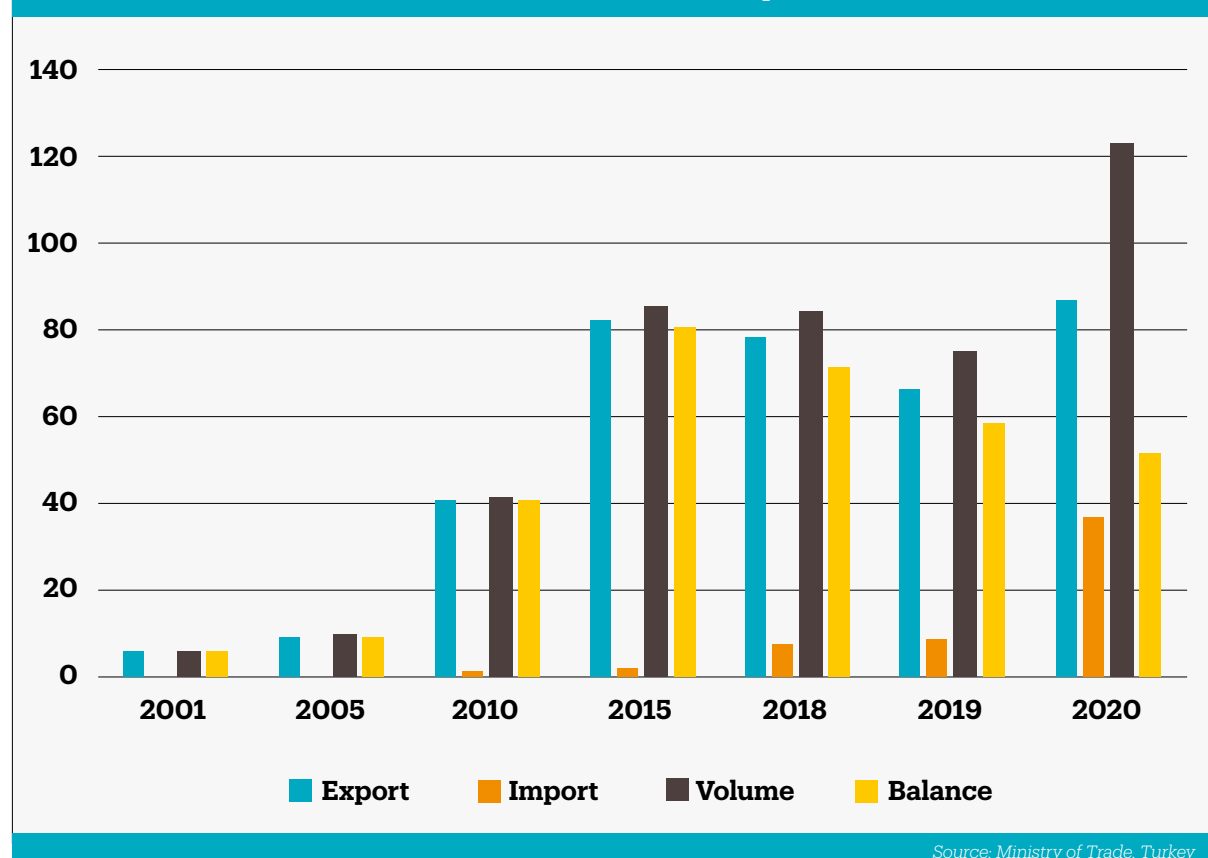
# Turkey-Palestinian Authority Relations

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has had close cultural and social bonds with Palestine and the Palestinian people. Since the emergence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkish people from all ideological stances, leftist political groups or Islamist/conservative political factions, have jointly stood behind the Palestinians. Having established official relations with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1975, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State established in exile in 1988. Since the Oslo-I (1993) and Oslo-II Agreements (1995), Turkey has supported the efforts of the State of Palestine to be recognized as such in international fora. Ankara was one of the greatest supporters of Palestine's upgrade of status to a "non-member observer state" at the UN on 29 November 2012.

Economic relations between Turkey and the State of Palestine have steadily gained ground since the Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2004. Since then, Turkey has

had an active role in international organisations and missions to improve the lives of the Palestinians. While the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) opened a branch in Ramallah in May 2005, Turkey also assists Palestinian refugees through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and participates in the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH). Moreover, Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent undertakes humanitarian activities along with projects in various fields, most notably healthcare, technical assistance, safeguarding of cultural heritage, water supply, construction of schools and scholarships for Palestinian students. The Turkish private sector has also contributed to Palestine particularly through the construction of the Jenin Organised Industry Zone project, which was undertaken by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB).

**Figure 1: Trade Relations between Turkey and Palestine (million USD)**



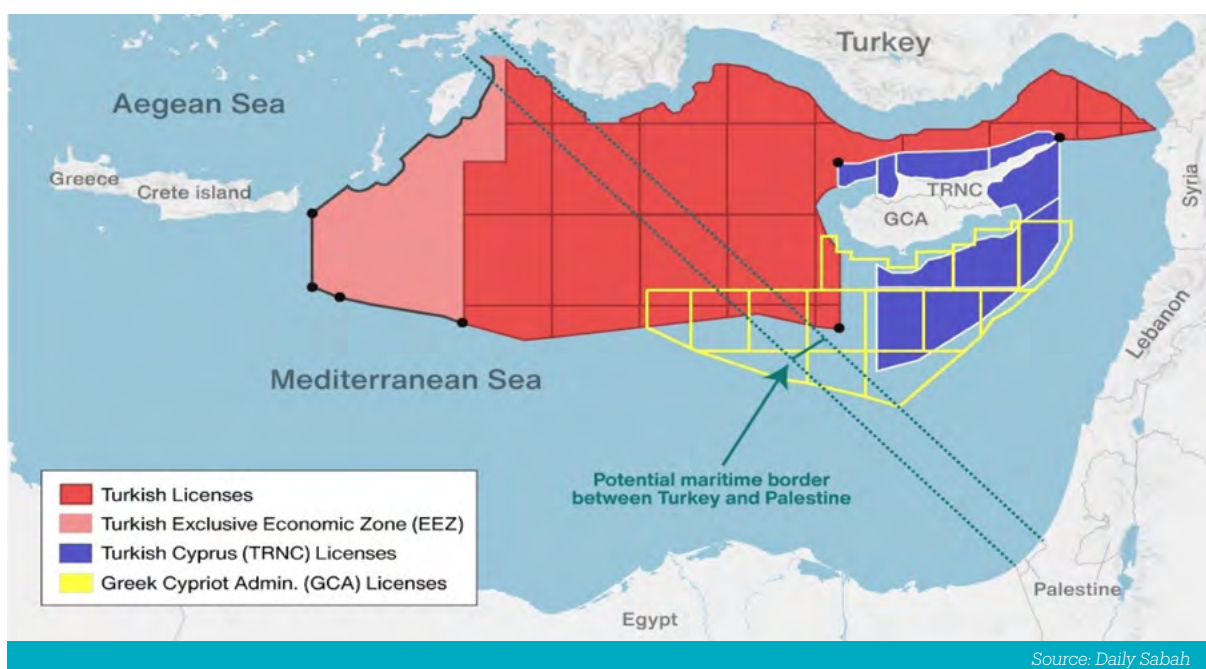
## The Agreement

The [agreement](#) came at a point when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was seeking regional actors to cooperate with and balance the normalisation trend between Israel and the Gulf States. The agreement was signed in October 2018 after the Trump administration decided to move its embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018. Moreover, right after the announcement of the Abraham Accords in 2020, Mahmoud Abbas paid a visit to Turkey after calling Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and met with Hamas officials to announce a new reconciliation deal with the group and holding parliamentary elections. Just like the timing for signing the agreement in 2018, the timing of the announcement for the agreement coming into force is also significant, especially after Turkey's support to Palestine during Israel's war against Gaza in May 2021.

According to the agreement, both sides reaffirmed their determination to fight against organised crime and to strengthen their cooperation against human trafficking and narcotics. Under the agreement, Turkey will also train and support the Palestinian security units, including police and gendarmerie, through know-how, information and intelligence sharing on developing counterterrorism strategies and blocking funding channels for terrorist organisations. Within the scope of the agreement, security services will be able to hold joint exercises. In this regard, the two sides have continued talks on facilitating cooperation and senior security officials from both sides

recently [gathered](#) on July 10 during Abbas's three-day Turkey visit. The meeting and efforts for such an extensive framework of cooperation reveal that Turkey-Palestine relations have entered a new phase. "The agreement that we signed prepares the ground for strengthening the institutional capacity of the State of Palestine. It activates the channels for sharing knowledge and experience," Turkish deputy foreign minister Yavuz Selim Kiran [said](#).

In addition, coast guard units will cooperate on the issue of protecting maritime borders, one of the most significant articles in the agreement. The 7<sup>th</sup> article prescribes that the two states may conduct mutual visits, high-level discussions, personnel exchange on ships/at headquarters, joint training practices and activities in cyberspace for information sharing on maritime issues. In accordance with the UN [Convention](#) of the Law of the Sea, the State of Palestine declared in 2019 that it has a maritime border that extends from Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip to the Rafah Governorate in the south at an average depth of 200 maritime miles (45 kilometres). Namely, even though the usage of the coastline is restricted due to Israel's ongoing blockade on Gaza, Palestine has internationally recognized maritime borders. Gaza has been under a land, sea and air blockade by Israel nearly for 15 years, and the Palestinian Naval Police's activities are restricted to 11 kilometres from the enclave's coast.





Prominent Observer Day activity of Blue Homeland-2021 Exercise off the coast of Canakkale in the Aegean Sea on March 06, 2021.  
(Arif Akdoğan - Anadolu Agency)

Experts have interpreted this agreement as representing a gateway to a potential maritime border delimitation agreement between the two states. Professor Cihat Yaycı, a former Turkish navy rear admiral and head of the Maritime and Global Strategies Centre at Bahçeşehir University, told the Turkish daily *Yeni Şafak* that the two countries should strike a mutually beneficial maritime deal. “[...] this (security cooperation) agreement is the first step for the implementation of the Libyan model in Palestine,” he [said](#). “If such a maritime deal is signed, this would also be in favour of other regional states. Thus, Israel and Egypt

will gain 10,000 and 14,000 square kilometres of sea-land consecutively.” Yaycı is known as the architect of Turkey’s maritime agreement with Libya and one of the masterminds of the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan) [doctrine](#), which is conceived as an effort to end Turkey’s near-complete dependence on foreign energy sources. The doctrine became a motivating factor for Turkish drilling activities in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and the Aegean Sea, which bore fruits after 405 billion cubic meters of gas was found at the nearby Tuna-1 well in the Sakarya field in 2020, the biggest ever discovery in the Black Sea.

## Challenges

### *Intra-Palestinian Disputes*

However, both the security cooperation agreement and a likely maritime agreement has some challenges ahead. First of all, there is the issue of Palestinian political unity. Since the last Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, Hamas and Fatah have become bitter rivals in the wake of the former’s takeover of the Gaza Strip. Turkey has been playing an active role in reconciliation talks between the two groups and it was one of the topics on the agenda during the latest Erdoğan-Abbas meeting in Istanbul.

Turkey’s support to Palestine and the potential maritime agreement that could emerge out of the latest security

cooperation deal was welcomed by both Palestinian groups. Highlighting the advantages that both Turkey and Palestine stand to gain with a maritime agreement, Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Political Bureau of the Hamas Movement [said](#) that such an agreement to delineate the maritime borders between Turkey and Palestine is quite possible, adding that. “The Palestinian coasts are of strategic importance in terms of containing natural gas resources, and any possible agreement between Turkey and Palestine will open the door to benefit from this wealth”.

However, the status of the first Palestinian Presidential elections in 15 years that had been scheduled for July 31

remains undetermined, further hindering reconciliation efforts. In April 2021, Mahmoud Abbas announced the vote would be postponed indefinitely until Israel agreed to allow Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem to participate. The 85-year-old leader's term formally expired in 2009, however, he has continued to govern the Palestinian Authority by decree for 12 years. Some [argued](#) that his decision to postpone the elections was taken due to his unpopularity, especially after the emergence of significant rivals that could challenge his position within the party: [Nasser al Qudwa](#), nephew of Yasser Arafat, who founded Fatah and the iconic first leader of the Palestinian people, and Mohammed Dahlan, a controversial UAE-based figure in exile.

## Egypt

Turkey's growing cooperation with Palestine might also have repercussions in the ongoing rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo, one of the main actors in the mediation efforts between Israel and the Palestinians. In a first since the 2013 military coup, Turkey and Egypt [held](#) exploratory talks in May 2021 and opened discussions on potential areas of cooperation. As Turkey and Egypt took tentative steps towards a limited reconciliation, Cairo gave some indications that it was dropping its opposition towards Turkey's stance vis-à-vis the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC) maritime claims. For example, Cairo [announced](#) a tender for gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean in March 2021 that implicitly recognised Turkish claims over its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Turkey welcomed this step and stated that Egypt's exploration bids had respected Turkey's continental shelf in the region. "As the two countries with the longest coastlines in the eastern Mediterranean, if our ties and the conditions allow it, we can also negotiate a maritime demarcation deal with Egypt and sign it amongst ourselves," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said in March 2021.

However, even though there has been progress in diplomatic talks, many issues remain. Together with the future of Egyptian opposition figures residing in Turkey, Libya has also become a contentious issue between Ankara and Cairo following Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar's visit to the war-torn North African country with a high-level delegation in June. Additionally, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed each travelled to Egypt to meet President Abdel

Fattah al-Sisi in May, which has been [interpreted](#) as an effort to push al-Sisi to slow down the rapprochement.

Turkey's attempt to boost its image in Palestine and take a more active role in Palestinian might reinvigorate the rivalry with Egypt and lead Cairo to gear down the rapprochement process with Ankara. Having maintained strong relations with Ankara for years, Hamas also currently [enjoys](#) good relations with Cairo after several crises erupted in the aftermath of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi-led coup in Egypt in 2013. Amidst such Turkish-Egyptian rivalry in regards to influence with Hamas, rumours around a possible maritime demarcation agreement, which were reported during the initial stages of Turkey-Egypt rapprochement, are currently stalled.

Turkey's initiating a similar process with Palestine without settling outstanding issues with Egypt might also fuel rivalry between Ankara and Cairo in Libya. In addition to signing a maritime agreement with Libya's UN-recognised Tripoli government, Turkish-made drones have played a critical role in forcing Khalifa Haftar's forces to retreat from western parts of the country in 2020. For its part, Egypt inaugurated a new naval base close to the Libyan border on July 3, the anniversary of the Sisi-led coup in 2013, a sign of its maintaining rivalry with Turkey.

## Israel

Implementation of the security cooperation deal and a likely maritime demarcation agreement between Turkey and Palestine requires considering Israel's reaction. Having entered a new period in domestic politics under the leadership of Naftali Bennett after 12 years of Benjamin Netanyahu's premiership, Israel remains silent on this development so far. On the other side, Turkey believes that the agreement and a prospective maritime deal with Palestine are not against Israel's interests. In a session held on February 5, 2020, at the Turkish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Deputy FM Kiran [said](#) that the Palestinian security forces will not be trained against Israel, but the agreement rather "aims to strengthen the institutional capacity of Palestinian security authorities." In parallel, the architect of the Turkey-Libya maritime deal Cihat Yaycı also [believes](#) that a Turkish-Palestinian maritime deal might encourage Israel to launch a similar initiative with Turkey. This is because the feasibility of the EastMed project remains an open question for [Israel](#) and an agreement with Ankara could provide a far cheaper and shorter route. Shortly before the formation of the new Israeli government, Yuval Steinitz, former Energy Minister



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (C), Greek Cypriot administration leader Nicos Anastasiades (L) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (R) pose for a photo prior to the signing of the EastMed agreement in Athens, Greece, 02 January 2020.  
(Yiannis Liakos - Anadolu Agency)

of Israel, [stated](#) in March that Tel Aviv is ready to cooperate with Turkey on natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean and expressed hope that Ankara could join the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in the future.

Energy experts [claim](#) that Turkey should be involved in efforts to exploit eastern Mediterranean gas by offering up its pipeline infrastructure as a route to market, which would be the cheapest way to deliver the gas to Europe. Even some media outlets in Greece argue that the 1,250-kilometer underwater pipeline is risky due to uncertain funding and EU climate change policy. "While its budget ranges from 6 to 10 billion euros, the minimum quantities of certified gas deposits have not been secured, raising questions as to whether it can pay for itself," [stated](#) Kathimerini, a well-known Greek daily. Critics have also said it will not be possible to fill the pipeline with the current known gas reserves off Israel's Eastern Mediterranean coast, and that even if Egypt is added to the project, the project's feasibility banks on potential new discoveries of reserves in the region.

Though strongly condemning atrocities against Palestinians, Turkey has also expressed its desire to see a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict on many occasions in recent months. Positive sentiments were also expressed by Israel's former Energy Minister, Yuval Steinitz, who in March said that Tel Aviv was ready to cooperate

with Turkey on natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey also [appointed](#) Selim Öztürk as the new culture counsellor for its Tel Aviv embassy on July 7 after an 11-year break. Moreover, Turkish President Erdoğan held a phone call with his Israeli counterpart, Isaac Herzog, on July 12 and discussed the potential for cooperation between the two countries in the fields of energy, tourism and technology. Oğuzhan Akyener, the chairperson of Turkey's Energy Strategy & Political Research Center (TESPAM), [said](#) that there is more hope now of developing bilateral relations between the two states, particularly in the energy area.

Nevertheless, the current Israeli government led by Bennett, a far-right politician from the Yamina party, and his coalition partners from other right-wing parties such as New Hope and Israel is our Home, potentially threatens areas of Turkish-Palestinian cooperation as well as the increasing contacts between Turkey and Israel. The two states have also taken different positions on many regional issues, including the blockade on Qatar, Arab-Israeli normalisation and the dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean, which have kept relations strained. With a fragile pattern of bilateral relations, Israel's attempt to restrict Turkey's efforts to bolster ties with Palestine might dampen the mood of optimism in Turkish-Israeli relations.

## Palestine and the EastMed Project

The security cooperation agreement and the potential for a maritime deal between Turkey and Palestine are also significant for the future of the EastMed project. The initiative, which excluded Turkey, began with an energy deal signed between Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration in November 2018 and was maintained in 2019 with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum including Israel, Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration, Egypt, Italy, Jordan and Palestine, which subsequently the Forum. Disregarding Turkey's consistently contesting the Greek Cypriot Administration's unilateral drilling in the area by asserting that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) also has rights to the resources in the area, Greece, Israel, and the Greek Cypriot administration signed a deal on the 1,900 kilometre-long (1,180 miles) EastMed project in January 2020.

Problems regarding the facilitation of the project were further complicated when Ankara and Libya's U.N.-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) signed a maritime deal in November 2020. Turkey and Libya's UN-backed GNA signed two separate memorandums of understanding (MoU), one on military cooperation and the other on maritime boundaries, with the latter enabling both Turkey and Libya to protect their rights and interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite continuing to be a member of the Forum, Palestine remains isolated. Palestinian officials [refused](#) to sign a Forum-related agreement in September 2020, upon the Palestinian leadership's decision to cut off contacts with Israel and [vetoed](#) the UAE's membership to the Forum, which was proposed by Israel in March 2021. However, as Yayıcı [noted](#), Palestine's membership in the Forum is crucial in terms of being recognised as an international entity that has its own coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean. International recognition of Palestinian naval sovereignty enables Turkey's launching an initiative on a maritime demarcation agreement.

## Conclusion

Representing a significant boosting of ties, a security cooperation agreement between Turkey and Palestine entered into force after three years after being signed in 2018. The agreement enables security cooperation with a notable focus on naval issues. The focus on naval cooperation is particularly important as it relates to the potential for the development of a maritime agreement along the lines of the 2020 deal signed between Turkey and Libya's GNA. While feasible, a potential maritime deal would face significant challenges based on several reasons related to Palestinian politics and Turkey's opening up a new page with regional states. As Turkey gains an increasingly strong position in Palestinian politics and Libya's conflict settlement process, how Israel and Egypt will react remains unknown. Ultimately, both the agreement and the potential for further cooperation between the two states are important for the future of Turkey's and Palestine's position in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.





