

~ EDITORIAL ~

HOW ISRAEL AND TURKEY COULD END UP IN A WAR NEITHER OF THEM WANTS

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On the morning of 18 August 2026, Israeli aircraft struck Abu Duhur Air Base in northwestern Syria. No one was killed. Broken concrete, several damaged structures, nothing more. In the grammar of this region, an airstrike without casualties barely qualifies as a headline.

And yet, according to Syrian officials cited by the Associated Press, less than a day earlier a Turkish delegation had walked along that same runway and inspected the rehabilitation works. Israel maintained that the strike was intended precisely to prevent a Turkish military deployment. Ankara and Damascus condemned the attack, but neither capital publicly confirmed that a permanent base was to be established there (Associated Press, 2026b). Four days later, US envoy Tom Barrack warned that, in the absence of clear notification, Turkey might scramble its own aircraft. Israel's defence minister disputed the American version regarding prior notification to Washington (Associated Press, 2026a).

That was the entire distance between a technical inspection and an airstrike: less than a day and one phone call that was never made. It is not proof that war is inevitable. It is proof that the space between deterrence and miscalculation has narrowed almost to zero. Since then, the question circulating everywhere has also been the least useful one: who would win? It is asked with a kind of sporting curiosity, as though two armed forces were two teams and the final score would eventually appear on a screen.

Israel would have to win quickly. Turkey would merely have to avoid losing quickly. These are not the same thing, and they are not even the same war. Israel can dictate the pace of the opening hours and possesses remarkable intelligence, air power and precision-strike capabilities. Turkey has a shared border with Syria, strategic depth, logistics, established military institutions and the capacity to sustain a presence for years. In a direct confrontation, the advantage at the beginning and the advantage over time would not belong to the same side. And wars are not decided in the first week, but in the tenth.

To understand how things reached this point, we have to go back to 8 December 2024, the day the Assad regime fell. Syria did not enter a new regional order that day. It entered a negotiation over one, conducted through spheres of influence, red lines and preventive strikes. Iran and Russia lost much of the leverage they once possessed. Turkey became one of the principal external supporters of the reconstruction of Syria's security institutions. Israel preserved its freedom of action in the air and

an advanced presence in the south. Analysts at SWP have described precisely this redistribution of power after Assad (Adar et al., 2025).

“New security architecture” is therefore a phrase far too orderly for what can actually be seen on the ground. For now, there is no architecture, only a construction site: scaffolding, concrete still wet, two different blueprints drawn over the same ground, and two builders who are not speaking to each other. The north is strategically tied to Ankara. The south is constrained by Israeli security imperatives. And the United States is moving among the scaffolding, trying to turn rivalry into managed deconfliction.

The August strike did not come out of nowhere. In April 2025, Reuters reported that Turkish teams had assessed the T-4, Palmyra and Hama bases for a possible deployment, and Israel struck those very facilities (Reuters, 2025a). Ankara condemned the attacks, yet Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated plainly that Turkey did not seek confrontation with Israel (Reuters, 2025b). On 9 April, Turkish and Israeli delegations met in Azerbaijan precisely to prevent military incidents in Syria (Times of Israel, 2025).

The relationship between the two states, once one of strategic cooperation, is now severely degraded by the war in Gaza, rhetoric and mistrust. And yet the technical channel functioned precisely at a time when public discourse had reached its lowest point. For security, this matters more than the temperature of political statements. States say one thing at the podium and something entirely different on the secure line. It is the secure line that keeps aircraft on the ground.

What is happening between Ankara and Jerusalem has a name, and the mechanism itself is hardly new. In 1978, Robert Jervis offered one of the most influential formulations of the security dilemma: measures through which one state seeks to increase its own security can make another state feel less secure, setting a spiral in motion even when neither side initially intended to act offensively (Jervis, 1978). You do not need an aggressor to end up in a war. It is enough for each side to defend itself.

Look at the runway at Abu Duhur in turn through each side’s eyes. For Ankara, training the new Syrian army and rebuilding military bases means stabilising a neighbouring country, controlling the border and creating an instrument against ISIS and the Kurdish groups it considers a threat. For Israel, that same runway, the same radar and the same air-defence batteries mean a closing sky and a rival power moving closer.

Then comes the part that closes the circle, almost like a textbook example: Israeli strikes, presented as preventive, weaken Damascus and deepen its dependence on Turkey. In other words, they produce precisely what they were meant to prevent. Each side calls its own action defence and the other side’s reaction aggression. Both are right about themselves. Both are wrong about the other.

There is something else that means the two capitals are, in practical terms, not living in the same time.

Strategic depth is not an abstract concept, however abstract the phrase may sound. It is a very concrete measurement: how many kilometres lie between a border and a major city, how many minutes exist between an alarm and a decision, how much territory can be lost without losing everything. Israel has few kilometres and few minutes. Its territory is narrow, its vital centres lie close to its borders, and its military depends on reservists who must be mobilised. From this follows, almost mechanically, an emphasis on early warning, short wars and moving the fighting beyond the country’s own territory. A recent doctrinal document prepared by the Institute for National Security Studies explicitly emphasises Israel’s lack of geographic depth and the need to shorten conflicts (INSS, 2025).

Turkey has both kilometres and minutes, as well as something that cannot be measured on a map: territory, population, industry and a network of relationships that allow it to absorb shocks and



remain standing. This does not guarantee victory. It guarantees only that Turkey cannot be finished in the opening days. In war, being impossible to finish quickly looks remarkably similar to not losing.

The second concept currently circulating is being used just as badly: escalation dominance. In 1965, Herman Kahn described escalation as a ladder made up of rungs, each with its own risks and possible exits (Kahn, 1965). To dominate escalation does not mean striking first and striking harder. It means preserving your advantage on every subsequent rung, including those you had not imagined when you stepped onto the first.

Israel may dominate the first rung in Syrian airspace. It does not follow that it can control what comes next: a Turkish response, diplomatic pressure, regional mobilisation, American intervention. Turkey can prolong the crisis, but every additional rung exposes its economy, NATO cohesion and its relationship with Washington. Neither side owns the ladder. Both believe they know where it ends. Usually, this is exactly where wars begin that no one wanted.

This brings us to the most widespread misunderstanding surrounding the crisis: NATO is invoked as an automatic mechanism, as though a downed aircraft would set the machinery in motion by itself. It does not work that way. Article 4 allows consultations when an ally considers its territorial integrity, political independence or security to be threatened; it would most likely be Ankara's first instrument. Article 5 applies in the event of an “armed attack”, and even then each ally determines the form of assistance it considers necessary, which may, but does not have to, include military force. Article 6 explicitly defines the geographical scope of these provisions: the territory of Turkey and certain forces, vessels or aircraft located within the areas specified by the Treaty, including the Mediterranean Sea. Turkish troops struck on Syrian territory do not fall clearly within this geographical framework (NATO, 1949; NATO, 2025a; NATO, 2025b).

There is also a fairly recent precedent. In February 2020, after Turkish troops were killed near Idlib, Ankara requested consultations under Article 4. NATO responded with solidarity and defensive measures. Not with Article 5 (NATO, 2020).

The Trump administration's position is more coherent than it appears to those waiting for Washington to make a clear-cut choice. In 2025, the White House terminated much of the US sanctions regime on Syria and defined its objective around a stable and unified Syria, capable of preventing an ISIS resurgence and moving towards peaceful relations with its neighbours, including Israel (The White House, 2025). In April 2025, Donald Trump publicly offered to help mediate between Israel and Turkey (The American Presidency Project, 2025). After the August 2026 incident, Barrack announced that work was underway on a trilateral Israel–Turkey–Syria deconfliction mechanism (Reuters, 2026).

This is not sentimental balancing. It is alliance management. Washington is trying to preserve, at the same time, Israel's security, the credibility of its commitment to a NATO ally, and the survival of the post-Assad Syrian project. Three objectives that do not contradict one another on paper and collide almost every day on the ground.

That is why the realistic solution is not a grand peace conference. It is a minimal pact, almost boringly technical: notification of sensitive flights and exercises; a permanent line between command centres; clear rules concerning what may and may not be built within Turkish-assisted Syrian military infrastructure; and an American channel capable of verifying an accusation before it becomes a target.

None of this resolves Gaza, the Golan Heights, the Kurdish question or the future of the government in Damascus. Technical deconfliction is not peace, and it is not even reconciliation. It is something else, more modest and more valuable: it buys time. And time is precisely the resource missing in an air crisis, the time required to prevent an alert from turning, within seconds, into an exchange of fire.

Because, in the end, that is what this is about. Not doctrines and not who is stronger on paper, but a person in a cockpit who has a few seconds to decide what the object on the screen actually is and whether someone, somewhere, told him it was supposed to be there.

The risk of confrontation is real not because either capital stands to gain from a war, but because both believe limited actions will remain limited. The new architecture will become credible only on the day when one side's security is no longer constructed through the negation of the other's.

Until then, at Abu Duhur, the concrete will be poured again. Someone will inspect it from close range. Someone else will look at it from above. And everything will depend on how quickly the two manage to tell each other, over a secure line, exactly what they are seeing.

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