

Turkey Israel: No longer Friends?:

Turkey cancels air force drill because of Israeli participation

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ISTANBUL: Turkey has canceled an annual joint air force drill scheduled for this week because it opposed Israeli participation, the Israeli military said Sunday, in the latest sign of deteriorating relations between the two countries.

Turkey had long been Israel's best friend in the Muslim world, but ties have cooled sharply since Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's sharp criticism of Israel's winter war in the Gaza Strip. Israeli media has linked Turkey's decision with the deadly Gaza offensive earlier this year, suggesting that the Turkish government was under pressure because of the Israeli participation.

The right-wing Israeli daily, Jerusalem Post, quoted the defense official as saying Turkey called off the drill "because the planes that Israel was going to send likely bombed Hamas targets during Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip."

"Ties between the countries are still tense," a defense official told the Post. "The announcement about the cancellation was sudden and unexpected."

The left-leaning Haaretz newspaper also said the motive behind the Turkish move was the deadly Gaza offensive. "Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been under pressure recently to exclude Israel from the drill, on the grounds that Israel must not be allowed to participate while its planes are bombing the Gaza Strip."

Meanwhile, a brief statement posted on the Turkish military's Web site said the annual Anatolia Eagle drill would take place Oct. 10-23, but that international participation had been canceled following "international negotiations conducted by the Turkish Foreign Ministry." The statement did not elaborate.

Turkish military officials were not available for comment. A government spokesman reached Sunday would only point to the military's statement, saying he had nothing more to add.

Sixth annual maneuver:

The Israeli military said in a statement that the drill was delayed indefinitely "because of Turkey's decision to change the list of participating countries, thus excluding Israel," according to a report the Associated Press.

The exercise was to have been the sixth annual maneuver of its kind. The Israeli military said it was to have included U.S., Italian and NATO forces. Israeli defense officials said Ankara canceled the drill after the U.S. pulled out over the Turkish decision to blackball

Israel.

They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the matter with the media. The Israeli foreign ministry had no comment.

The Turkish move was different from other "unsympathetic" positions Ankara has taken toward Israel since the war because it harms Turkish military interests, said Amikam Nachmani, an Israeli political scientist. In the past, Turkey has spoken critically of Israel but has refrained from harming military ties, he said.

"This is a warning bell," Nachmani said.

Israel and Turkey have wide-ranging military, economic and strategic ties, and last year Ankara hosted months of indirect talks between Israel and Syria after an eight-year breakdown. But tensions peaked when Erdogan stormed out of a high-profile conference where he confronted Israel's president over steep Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza.

Palestinian officials and human rights groups say more than 900 civilians died in the offensive, which was launched to halt years of rocket fire from Gaza on southern Israel. Israel disputes that number but has provided no evidence to back up its claim.

The Israeli air force last conducted joint maneuvers with Turkey several months before the war broke out in December. Turkish-Israeli ties have been tested in the past by earlier attacks on Palestinians but strong security interests helped to mend fences.

Turkey and Israel grew close in the mid-1990s....Israel has supplied hundreds of millions of dollars in military hardware to Turkey over the years, the two countries conduct joint naval exercises and the Israeli air force trains over Turkish airspace.

But since Erdogan's government came to power in 2003, Turkey's ties with Israel have cooled. Turkey says the Islamic militant Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, must play a key role in the Palestinian territories.

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