
SOURCE FILE

ANKARA'S HARDENING

A BID TO OCCUPY THE LEVANT LEADERSHIP SPACE IRAN'S
DEFEAT VACATED, FOUGHT HARDEST IN SYRIA, EXECUTED
IN TRADE, BOUNDED BY A MANAGED US TRACK



CORE GROUP

Date Issued: 23 June 2026

Prepared By: Core Group — Strategic Analysis Unit

KEY JUDGMENTS

KJ-01 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Turkey has hardened its posture toward Israel from rhetorical opposition into a structural contest for the post-war Levant order. The contest is a bid to occupy the regional leadership and anti-Israel space that Iran's defeat in the June 2026 war vacated, not a reaction to Israeli action. Erdogan's 10 June declaration that Turkish security "does not begin in Hatay, but in Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut" extends Ankara's defense perimeter into the northern Levant as stated doctrine, but the move is the public face of a positioning play that began before the speech and runs across every front below.

KJ-02 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Syria is the primary and most dangerous point of direct Turkey-Israel contact. Both militaries operate inside the same country on incompatible terms, Turkey building toward a permanent air presence and Israel striking to deny it. Israel hit the T4 and Palmyra airbases in early 2025 specifically to preempt Turkish deployment, and a single Azerbaijan-brokered technical channel separates the contest from a clash. That channel is itself the evidence: two states with no ambassadorial ties maintain it because both have independently decided the Syria contest must not go kinetic.

KJ-03 HIGH CONFIDENCE

The trade embargo is the contest's economic spine, its one fully executed instrument, and the strongest single reason to read the shift as structural rather than as another turn of the recurring Turkey-Israel rupture-and-normalization cycle. Ankara halted all trade with Israel in May 2024, severing an exchange that peaked near 7 billion dollars, and moved in February 2026 to close the third-country routing that had kept goods leaking across. Through every prior rupture since 2010 the economic relationship survived. This is the first time Ankara has cut it, and the cut is tightening rather than reopening.

KJ-04 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Israel confronts in Turkey a rival it cannot treat the way it treated Iran. Turkey is a NATO ally inside the US security architecture, with no nuclear program to strike and an economy too large to coerce, which denies Israel the sabotage, interdiction, and direct-strike toolkit it ran against Tehran. Israel has been forced into containment by denial, the Syria strikes, the December 2025 Greece-Cyprus military pact, and reliance on Washington's hold over Ankara, rather than the offensive disruption that defined its Iran campaign. The asymmetry of available instruments, not the balance of intent, is what shapes the contest's ceiling.

KJ-05 **MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**

A parallel managed US-Turkey transactional track caps every front except trade. The 7-8 July NATO Ankara summit, the SAMP/T deployment at Konya, the unresolved S-400 and F-35 file, and the Halki seminary gesture run alongside the escalation. Erdogan is running a two-level game, maximal anti-Israel posture for the domestic and Sunni-world audience and operational restraint for Washington, and the two reinforce each other only while he is not forced to choose between them. The open Abraham Accords ask is the variable that would force the choice.

KJ-06 **MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**

Lebanon is the contest's most exposed future edge, not a current flashpoint. Beirut's inclusion in the perimeter declaration gives Ankara a Syria-style entry vector, declared protector first and footprint later, and offers Lebanese actors, the Sunni bloc in particular, maneuver room that neither the Iran axis nor the Gulf-US conditionality track provides. The same entry would import the Turkey-Israel contest into a theater where Israel already operates and complicate the disarmament-for-reconstruction bargain, because Ankara's mediation framing accommodates Hezbollah rather than dismantling it. The claim is matched today by soft power only, with no security footprint.

I. SCOPE AND KEY ASSUMPTIONS

This assessment rests on three linchpins. First, the parallel US-Turkey agenda, the NATO Ankara summit, NATO air-defense integration, the unresolved S-400 and F-35 file, and the Halki seminary, is worth more to Ankara than direct anti-Israel action, which keeps the confrontation rhetorically maximal but operationally bounded below sustained kinetic risk. Second, the shift is structural and not a recurrence of the rupture-and-normalization pattern that has governed the relationship since 2010, because two facts present now have no precedent in the prior cycles: a trade embargo Ankara has carried at one-sided cost for over two years, and a physical Turkish military footprint in Syria that only became possible after Assad's fall. Third, Turkey holds indirect-contest capability while showing no intent for sustained direct confrontation against Israel, with the single exception of Syrian airspace, where the deconfliction channel rather than the absence of contact is what holds the line. Each linchpin is subject to revision. The second carries the most weight and the least margin: if Ankara signals normalization at or after the NATO summit, the cyclical reading gains and the structural one weakens. The Indicators to Monitor specify the developments that would force a rethink.

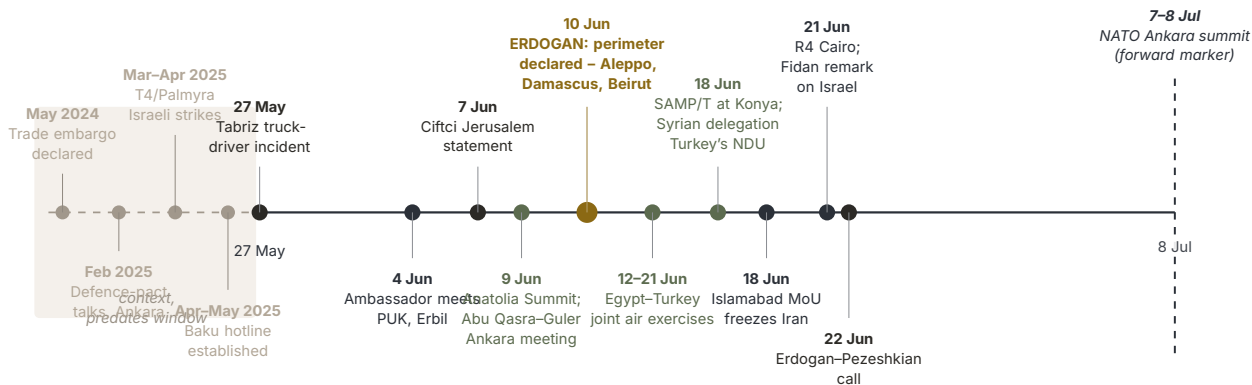
II. INTELLIGENCE

FIGURE 1

The June escalation turns on one speech, atop a Syrian contest already a year old

Key events 27 May – 8 July 2026, with the pre-window context that predates them

●Pivot ●Military ●Diplomatic ●Rhetorical ●Context



Reading order. The 10 June speech converted a posture of opposition into stated doctrine, but it is an inflection in a sequence that began with the May 2024 trade embargo and was fought hardest in Syrian airspace from early 2025. The pre-window band is context, not a measured timeline; node spacing there is schematic and carries no proportional date scale. Main-axis nodes anchor to canonical.article_items IDs in the research base except the Tabriz incident (canonical.events id 31539) and the Baku deconffliction channel (reporting-grade).

A. Why Ankara moved

The June 2026 US-Iran war removed the one regional power whose Levant ambitions capped Turkey's. Iran emerged from the exchange with its deterrent against Israel spent, its Syrian land bridge already severed by Assad's fall in December 2024, and its Axis of Resistance discredited as a model for Sunni publics. The Islamabad memorandum of 18 June froze that diminished Iran in place under a US-managed settlement. The strategic effect is a vacuum in two spaces Iran had occupied for two decades: leadership of the regional anti-Israel cause, and the role of external patron in a Syria and a Lebanon now reorganizing their alignments.

Turkey is moving to occupy both. Ankara holds the assets to make the bid credible where a degraded Tehran no longer can: a functioning economy, a NATO membership, the region's largest deployable military, a defense-export base reaching some forty countries, and, since Assad's fall, a physical foothold in the country that bridges Anatolia to the Levant. The contest with Israel is downstream of that bid rather than its origin. Israel is the fixed adversary against which leadership of the Sunni cause is measured, the actor most able to obstruct a Turkish-anchored Syria, and the competitor for the same Eastern Mediterranean and arms-market space. Casting Israel as the principal threat to the regional order does for Ankara what it once did for Tehran: it converts opposition to Israel into a claim on regional primacy.

This logic ties the fronts into one system rather than nine quarrels. The trade embargo signals that Ankara will pay a price the Gulf states will not. The Syria footprint builds the material stake. The Egypt exercises and the defense-export drive assemble a Sunni military bloc around Turkish leadership. The maritime claim contests the energy architecture that would route around Turkey. The Hamas and Kurdish theaters hold points of pressure on Israel without direct exposure. The Beirut declaration stakes the next vacuum before it closes. Each front is an instrument of the same positioning play, and each is calibrated to advance it without forcing the rupture with Washington that would make the play unaffordable.

B. The 10 June inflection

Through the June 2026 US-Iran exchange, Ankara held a posture of opposition to the strikes without alignment to Tehran. Turkey did not join US-Israeli operations against Iran. It refused Iranian missile overflight near Turkish airspace and toward the Gulf states. That posture was the baseline until the second week of June.

On 10 June 2026, at the AKP parliamentary group meeting, Erdogan recast it. He declared that Turkish security “does not begin in Hatay, but in Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut,” named Israel’s operations against Syria and Lebanon a direct threat to Turkey, and pledged that Ankara “will not allow a fait accompli in our brotherly countries.” The same day, Netanyahu called Erdogan an “antisemitic dictator” who supports Hamas and commits “genocide against the Kurds.” Erdogan answered that Netanyahu was “following the path of Hitler” and “will end up as all tyrants did.”

The rhetorical front widened around the speech rather than starting with it. Interior Minister Mustafa Ciftci stated on 7 June that Turkey would “one day witness the liberation of Jerusalem,” drawing condemnation from Israeli Defense Minister Katz. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, in Cairo on 21 June, told a regional gathering that “there is always an Israel waiting in the corner, ready to sabotage the process as soon as it finds the opportunity.” On 22 June, Erdogan called Iranian President Pezeshkian to welcome the Islamabad memorandum and warned Tehran to guard against “those who seek to sabotage the negotiations.” The message holds across the statements. Ankara casts Israel as the actor most likely to break the US-Iran settlement and positions Turkey as the guarantor against that outcome. This is signaling, read as intent and held apart from the question of capability.

The speech converted a posture of opposition into a stated doctrine, placing the northern Levant inside Turkey’s declared defense perimeter and tying Turkish security to the territorial outcomes in Syria and Lebanon. Its timing is the tell. Erdogan declared the perimeter in the same fortnight the US-Iran war removed Iran from the board, which dates the doctrine to the opening of the vacuum, not to any new Israeli provocation against Turkey. The doctrine rides on a contest already running for more than a year, fought hardest in Syria, where Turkish and Israeli forces have operated in the same airspace since Assad’s fall.

FIGURE 2

The relationship has ruptured and healed before, but this break severs the spine the prior ones spared

Turkey–Israel relationship 2010–2026: diplomatic cycles vs the two structural constants



Reference-class read. Diplomatic ties cycled on and off through every rupture since 2010. Trade held unbroken and growing through the 2010 and 2018 ruptures; it is severed for the first time in May 2024 and tightening in 2026, not reversing. Turkish military presence in Syria (the Levant) did not exist before December 2024; it is a new structural feature with no prior-cycle analogue. The HIGH-confidence structural call in Assessment 1 rests on these two observations. The call would weaken if Ankara signalled normalization.

† Trade figures are reporting-grade and DB-absent for Turkey (*canonical_macro_indicator* carries no Turkey trade rows). No quantities appear on the bars. Peak figure (~\$7bn) and residual 2025 flow (~\$924m) are cited in the text, not on this exhibit. Historical data is reference-class context predating the DB window.

C. Syria: the primary flashpoint

Israel has struck Syrian territory roughly 990 times since Assad fell in December 2024, close to triple the total of the preceding seven years, and the target set shifted over 2025 from Iran-linked assets to Turkish-linked infrastructure. The clearest case came early. Turkish survey teams scoped the T4 and Palmyra airbases in central Syria in February and March 2025 for air-defense and drone basing under a planned defense pact with Damascus. Israel struck both bases on 21 and 22 March, cratered the T4 runway in follow-on strikes on 2 April, and a third Turkish survey visit set for 25 March was cancelled hours before after Israel hit the sites again. Israeli officials framed the strikes as a message that Israel would not accept an expanded Turkish military presence. Turkey continued building toward control at T4 regardless, and by late 2025 was training Syrian personnel on Turkish air-defense munitions. No Turkish system is confirmed emplaced and operational at T4 as of late June 2026.

The defense relationship behind the airbase race is now formal. Al-Sharaa and Erdogan discussed a mutual defense agreement in Ankara in February 2025, with reported terms covering Turkish airbases, Turkish access to Syrian airspace, and a Turkish lead in training the new Syrian army. Damascus and Ankara signed a military training and consultancy agreement in August 2025. Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra met Turkish counterpart Yasar Guler in Ankara on 9 June 2026, and a Syrian military delegation visited Turkey's National Defense University in Istanbul on 18 June. The economic spine runs alongside it: the Gaziantep Anatolia Summit on 9 June set a reconstruction framework, Turkish contractors confirmed

readiness for Syrian contracts on 22 June, and Bilal Erdogan opened an investment and cultural project in Aleppo in May. Each strand binds the al-Sharaa government more tightly to Ankara. Turkey is building a Damascus that cannot easily exit Turkish tutelage, and a Damascus dependent enough to anchor the Levant bid.

The two states hold incompatible visions for what Syria becomes. Ankara seeks a centralized state under an Ankara-friendly Damascus, with Turkish-trained armed forces, Turkish reconstruction contracts, and a Turkish-brokered absorption of the SDF. Israel seeks a weak and fragmented Syria incapable of hosting hostile air defense, and has pursued it through persistent strikes, support for Druze and Kurdish autonomy, and a buffer it is building in the south. Israel seized roughly 350 square kilometers beyond the 1974 UNDOF line after Assad's fall, runs a road network through Quneitra, averaged 17.5 ground incursions a week into southern Syria through mid-2025, and entered Quneitra again on 19 June. Israel arms the Suwayda Military Council and Druze groups advocating autonomy, the inverse of Turkey's centralization project, and assesses the SDF as a counterweight to a Turkish-dominated Damascus. Turkish officials assess Israeli strikes on the Damascus presidential palace and defense ministry as a deliberate signal that deterred the SDF from following through on its March 2025 agreement to merge with the new Syrian army.

The contest exposes the limit of Israel's reach against Turkey. Against Iran, Israel struck the nuclear program, assassinated scientists, and interdicted proxy supply on foreign soil. Against Turkey, none of those instruments applies: there is no Turkish nuclear program, no foreign-soil proxy network of the Iranian type, and no path to direct pressure on a NATO ally that would not damage Israel's own standing with Washington. So Israel works the one space where Turkey is physically exposed and deniably reachable, Syrian territory under a government Ankara is sponsoring, striking Turkish-linked infrastructure to deny the air presence rather than confronting Turkey directly. The Syria campaign is the available substitute for the disruption Israel cannot run against Turkey itself.

A direct clash has not happened, and one technical mechanism is the reason. Israeli and Turkish delegations met in Baku in April 2025 for the first formal military deconfliction talks, hosted and mediated by Azerbaijan, the one state allied to both and the supplier of roughly 40 percent of Israel's oil. The two sides established a 24/7 hotline by May 2025 to prevent accidental clashes in Syrian airspace, modeled on the prior Israel-Russia mechanism. The channel has prevented incidents since. Ankara characterizes it as strictly technical, a precaution against accidents that signals neither normalization nor any shared Syria policy. The channel reveals more than that framing admits. Two governments with no ambassadorial ties and opposed Syria projects have each decided, and quietly told the other, that the contest must not go kinetic, and Azerbaijan, which needs both, enforces the equilibrium. It is a tacit mutual ceiling. Its fragility comes from the depth of the underlying conflict, not from any gap in the mechanism. A Turkish air-defense system going operational at T4, an Israeli strike that hits a Turkish-flagged asset or kills Turkish personnel, or a Turkish move to assert active air presence would each test the ceiling past what a technical hotline can hold.

FIGURE 3

Structural hardening across the fronts, each an instrument of one positioning play, bounded by the US track except trade

Nine fronts by direct-contact risk, pre-war baseline through post-10 June vector

Table 1:

| Front | Pre-war baseline | Post-10 June state | Vector | What Ankara wins | What bounds it |
|--------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|
| Levant, Syria | Turkish survey teams at T4/Palmyra; defence pact talks with Damascus; no formal military presence | Active military contest: airbase race; approx. 990 Israeli strikes since Dec 2024; Turkey training Syrian army; defence agreement signed; deconfliction channel holding | Escalating | Permanent air-defence footprint in Syria; a Damascus dependent on Ankara; the physical stake for the Levant-leadership bid | The Baku deconfliction ceiling, not the US track; would not survive a Turkish air-defence system going operational at T4 against Israeli strike corridors |
| Economic, trade embargo | Trade peaked approx. \$7bn (2022); Turkey among Israel's largest suppliers | Embargo declared May 2024; third-country routing closed Feb 2026; approx. \$924m residual 2025 flow †; policy tightening | Structural | Demonstrates willingness to pay a cost Gulf states will not; converts sacrifice into a credibility claim for Sunni-world leadership | Enforcement and leakage, not the US track; the one front Washington's agenda does not bound |
| East-Med maritime | Blue Homeland doctrine advanced; warships at cable survey area Jul 2024; EastMed pipeline on hold | Blue Homeland legislation introduced May 2026; Israel-Greece-Cyprus Dec 2025 trilateral defence pact active; Great Sea Interconnector route at risk | Bounded | Denies Israel and Cyprus the energy architecture that would bypass Turkey | Kinetically latent; converts to live dispute when legislation is enacted or cable construction resumes |
| Gaza, Hamas base | Turkey hosts Hamas politburo; flotilla vessels Turkish-based; ICJ accession filed Aug 2024 | Shin Bet: dozens of West Bank attacks directed from Turkey (21 Jun 2026); two flotillas intercepted May 2026; Ankara condemns as piracy | Structural | Sustains Palestinian-cause leadership claim; provides deniable operational base | Indirect by construction: Turkey provides base, not trigger; US has not pressed the Hamas-hosting front directly |
| Kurdish theater | Exclusive KDP engagement; no PUK contact; Mossad-Kurdish arms channel active | Ambassador meets PUK in Erbil (4 Jun); reported Mossad-Kurdish arms channel halted after Erdogan pressure on Trump | Escalating | Narrows Israel's Kurdish-arming options; extracts a concrete Israeli loss through Washington, not against it | Unconfirmed whether arms halt is permanent or suspended |
| Egypt defence axis | No formal defence cooperation with Egypt | Joint air exercises 12–21 Jun 2026 (first in 20 years); US State Dept requests assessments from missions in Cairo and Ankara | Bounded | Assembles the Sunni military bloc the Levant-leadership bid requires | Cairo-Washington relationship moderates Egypt's room; exercises not yet a standing arrangement |

Continued on next page

Table 1: (Continued)

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|--|-------------------|--|---|
| Rhetorical, diplomatic | Recurrent anti-Israel rhetoric; no perimeter doctrine | 10 Jun perimeter declaration; Ciftci Jerusalem statement (7 Jun); Fidan Cairo remark (21 Jun); R4 communique | Escalating | Locks in anti-Israel positioning at zero operational cost; builds domestic base and Sunni-world signal | No credibility cost while operational posture remains bounded; cost arrives if rhetoric forces a binary choice with Washington |
| Levant, Lebanon | No Turkish presence; mediation offer on Hezbollah file (late Apr 2026) | Declared interest, soft-power probes only: humanitarian deliveries, ambassador attendance, civil-society engagement; no security footprint | Latent | Secures a stake in Lebanon's external alignment at the moment of realignment; offers Sunni bloc maneuver room outside Gulf-US conditionality track | Turkey holds no forces or advisory presence; Ankara's framing accommodates Hezbollah, cutting against the disarmament-for-reconstruction bargain |
| US transactional track | S-400/CAATSA sanctions; F-35 exclusion since 2019; no summit scheduled | NATO Ankara summit 7-8 Jul; Trump confirms; Halki gesture (21 Jun); F-35 reentry floated; Abraham Accords ask unresolved | Managed | Bilateral capital: F-35 reentry, lira stability, summit prestige; all inaccessible if operational restraint is abandoned | The bounding mechanism for every front except trade; holds only while Erdogan is not forced to choose; Abraham Accords ask is the demand that forces the choice |

:

One strategy, nine instruments. Every front is calibrated to advance the Levant-leadership bid without forcing the rupture with Washington that would make the play unaffordable. Syria is the only front carrying live direct-contact risk. The trade embargo is the only front the US track does not bound.

† Trade figures are reporting-grade and DB-absent for Turkey (*canonical_macro_indicator* carries no Turkey trade rows). Peak figure (~\$7bn, 2022) and residual 2025 flow (~\$924m) are cited in the text and in this table as stated approximations, not DB-anchored measurements. Do not read as a measured trade series.

Source: research base, Syria re-evaluation addendum, Lebanon trade addendum, Core Group analysis.

D. The trade embargo

Turkey halted all trade with Israel in May 2024 and has held the embargo through every subsequent turn of the regional war. The severed exchange peaked near 7 billion dollars at its 2022 high, the bulk of it Turkish exports of steel, cement, vehicles, and refined goods, and Ankara cut it with no reciprocal Israeli concession. The cost has run one way and has held for over two years.

The embargo leaked, and Ankara moved to close the leaks. Turkish goods kept reaching Israel through third-country routing, leaving Turkey among Israel's largest suppliers in 2024 and sending roughly 924 million dollars in goods across in 2025, with about 176 million more in the first two months of 2026. In February 2026 Ankara stopped issuing the preferential-origin certificates that enabled the European re-export channel, the clearest available measure that the policy is tightening rather than quietly reopening. Turkish opposition figures, not the government, exposed the residual flow, and the government answered by enforcing harder.

The embargo is the load-bearing evidence that this break differs from the cycle. The relationship has ruptured before, in 2010 and again in 2018, and each time the rhetoric ran ahead of the substance while trade and the structural ties survived intact. The 2024 cut is the first to sever the economic spine, and Ankara has carried the loss for two years and is still tightening it. An actor running another reversible rhetorical cycle does not pay that bill. The embargo also sits apart from every other front in a second way: it is the one instrument the US track does not bound. Washington's broader Iran-peace and NATO agenda runs in parallel without visibly conditioning Turkish trade policy toward Israel, which Ankara tightened in the same window it courted Trump on the Halki seminary. Where the Syria footprint is managed and the maritime claim latent, the embargo is fired, held, and unconstrained.

E. The Eastern Mediterranean and maritime front

Turkey's Blue Homeland legislation, introduced in May 2026, would formalize maritime claims across much of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. The claimed zones overlap the Great Sea Interconnector, the Israel-Cyprus-Greece subsea power cable whose route runs through waters Ankara claims, and they conflict with the Law of the Sea. Turkey sent warships to the cable's survey area in July 2024 when the route work was underway, and the project has since slipped past 2029 after the Greek side paused payments. The legislation places Ankara in structural opposition to the EastMed energy architecture, a front of the contest that runs through infrastructure and legal claim rather than force, and one that binds Lebanon's own contested maritime frontier to the same dispute.

The front is no longer one-sided, and the counter-move illustrates Israel's constrained toolkit. Unable to coerce Ankara directly, Israel built a coalition: Israel, Greece, and Cyprus signed a trilateral military work plan in Nicosia in December 2025 covering joint exercises, aerial refueling south of Crete, UAV coordination, and Iron Beam data sharing, and naming Turkey as

the common challenge. The plan converts the maritime contest from a Turkish legal claim facing no institutional counter into an active defense alignment with exercises already scheduled for 2026. It is containment by alignment, the maritime analogue of the Syria strikes: Israel assembling partners against a Turkish claim it cannot confront alone. The front stays latent in kinetic terms. It converts into a live dispute when the Blue Homeland legislation is enacted, when cable construction resumes and Turkish warships return, or when a trilateral exercise draws a Turkish naval response.

F. The indirect fronts: Gaza, the Kurds, and the Egypt bloc

Turkey is the operational base for Hamas's West Bank direction, and Israel treats it as a sustained security front rather than an isolated incident. The Shin Bet announced on 21 June 2026 that it had foiled dozens of Hamas attacks in the West Bank directed by operatives based in Turkey, with intensity rising over the prior year, and named senior Hamas figures running the activity from Istanbul. Two Gaza-bound flotillas departed Turkish ports in May 2026, Israel intercepted both, and Ankara condemned the interception as piracy and opened investigations. Turkey moved to join South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice in 2024. The Hamas-hosting front is active, ongoing, and indirect by construction: Turkey provides the base, not the trigger, which keeps it below the threshold the US has so far chosen not to press and preserves Ankara's deniability while it builds the leadership claim on the Palestinian cause.

The Kurdish theater is where Turkey converted a US relationship into pressure on Israel. A reported Mossad channel supplying Kurdish forces with captured Hamas and Hezbollah weapons was halted by Trump after Erdogan pressure, a concession that narrowed Israel's options in the Kurdish file, though whether the halt is permanent or a suspension is unconfirmed. Turkey's ambassador met PUK leadership in Erbil on 4 June, breaking a decade-long preference for exclusive KDP engagement and narrowing the space for Israeli or US Kurdish-arming programs in northern Iraq. The same logic extends into northeast Syria, where Israel views the SDF as a potential counterweight to a Turkish-dominated Damascus and Turkey works to fold the SDF into the new Syrian army. The Kurdish file is the one front where Ankara has already extracted an Israeli loss, and it did so through Washington rather than against it.

Egypt and Turkey ran joint air force exercises at Egyptian bases from 12 to 21 June 2026, flying multi-role combat aircraft from both sides in their first such drills in two decades. US and Israeli officials raised concerns about the deepening relationship, and the US State Department requested assessments from its missions in both countries. The exercises are the most visible operational signal of a Cairo-Ankara defense alignment that shares Turkey's political positions on Gaza, though they have not yet converted into a standing arrangement. They are also the clearest move to assemble the Sunni military bloc the leadership bid requires, pairing the region's two largest Arab and non-Arab Sunni militaries around shared positions. Underneath runs a structural commercial rivalry. Turkish defense and aviation exports passed 10 billion dollars in 2025, and Turkish systems now compete with Israeli ones for the same Arab

defense budgets, cheaper if less sophisticated, a contest with no kinetic edge but real consequences for which supplier anchors regional alignment.

G. Lebanon: the declared edge

Beirut's inclusion in the perimeter declaration is not symmetric with Aleppo and Damascus. The Syria footprint is observed, material, and militarized. The Lebanon claim is matched only by soft power. Turkey approached Washington and Beirut in late April 2026 with an offer to mediate the Hezbollah file and take an active role in the question of the group's future. Washington neither accepted nor refused, and Beirut received it coolly, wary of an expanding Turkish role. Turkish humanitarian deliveries reached Beirut port over the spring, attended by Ankara's ambassador, and Turkish-aligned civil society has built a presence among Lebanon's Sunni institutions. These are diplomatic and soft-power probes. No Turkish security arrangement, advisory presence, or reconstruction footprint toward Lebanon, of the kind observable in Syria, registers to date.

What the declaration claims is a stake in Lebanon's external alignment at the moment that alignment is being recast. Lebanon's field of external patrons has compressed since 2023. The Iran-Hezbollah axis that anchored the resistance bloc absorbed heavy attrition in the 2025-2026 fighting and no longer functions as Tehran's reliable Levant instrument, though it is degraded rather than eliminated. A Gulf and US reconstruction track, led from Riyadh and Washington and conditioned on Hezbollah's disarmament and the extension of state authority, is the dominant competing frame. Turkey now enters as a third pole, the only Sunni-majority NATO state claiming a stake in the outcome, and its mediation offer is framed around accommodating Hezbollah rather than dismantling it, which sets Ankara on a different vector from the Gulf and US track even where the two share an interest in limiting Iran.

The Turkish pole cuts both ways for Lebanon. For Lebanese actors, and the Sunni bloc in particular, a third patron offers maneuver room that neither the conditionality track nor the degraded Iran axis provides, and a Sunni-world sponsor that does not arrive with the disarmament precondition attached. That same room is a liability. A Turkish mediation that accommodates rather than dismantles Hezbollah cuts directly against the disarmament-for-reconstruction bargain the Gulf and Washington are offering, and importing Ankara as a protector imports the Turkey-Israel contest into Lebanese territory. The opening Turkey offers Lebanon and the complication it brings are the same move seen from two sides.

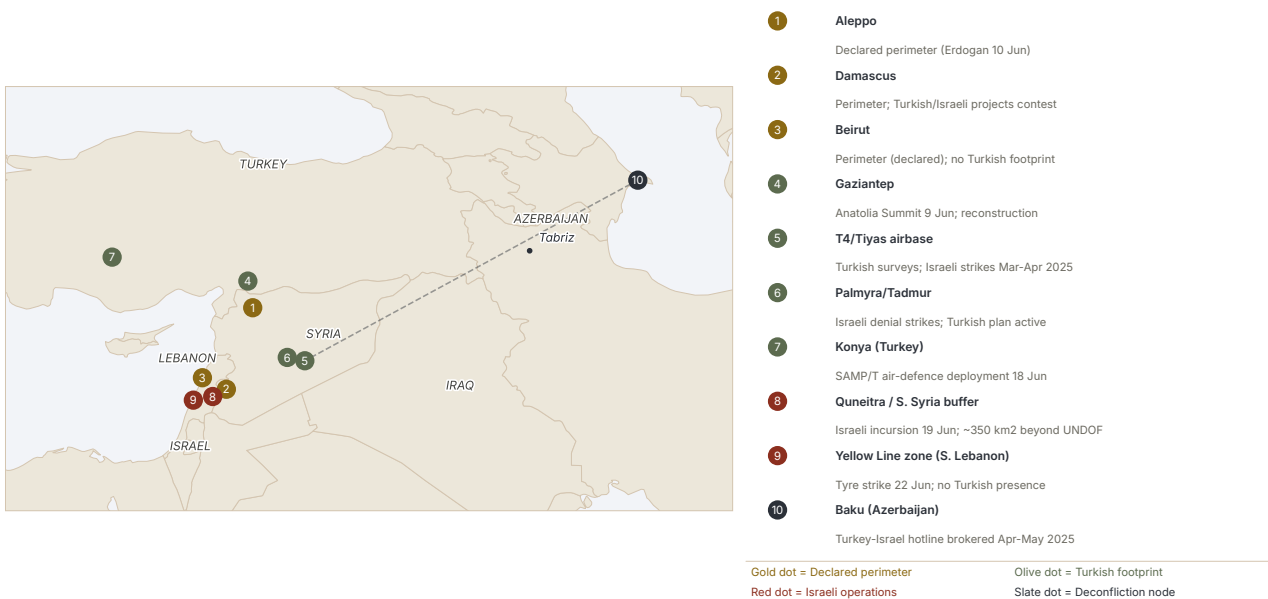
Lebanon is a less immediate point of direct Turkey-Israel contact than Syria, and the distinction is load-bearing. In Syria, both militaries are physically present, contesting the same airspace and the same political outcome, and a deconfliction channel exists because the risk of a clash is real. In Lebanon, only Israel is present. Israeli forces hold a security zone along the unilaterally declared Yellow Line, struck targets as recently as 22 June, and negotiate a withdrawal in Washington, while Turkey holds no forces, no advisory presence, and no deconfliction channel there. The absence of that channel is not evidence that Lebanon is more

exposed. It is evidence that Turkey has nothing yet to deconflict. The danger Lebanon carries is forward-looking. Were Ankara to operationalize its Beirut declaration even at the modest level it operationalized Syria, declared protector first and footprint later, it would enter a theater where Israeli forces are already present, no bilateral mechanism exists, and the contested truce keeps the trigger threshold low. The distance between the declared interest and the absent footprint is the pre-footprint phase of a trajectory the indicators below are built to catch, not a live collision today.

FIGURE 4

The geography of contact: Syria a live contest, Lebanon an edge where only Israel operates

Declared doctrine vs observed footprint vs active Israeli operations (as of 23 June 2026)



Source: DB anchors: A-fd1772b39f5bbfd, A-2f33d1d6487b6f6f, A-907f9ac8bc81f177, A-dfd5ba17867caab1, A-9bcaaf2e720ea56. Airbase strikes and Baku deconfliction: reporting-grade. Core Group analysis. Core Group · 24 June 2026

H. The managed US track

The NATO summit convenes in Ankara on 7-8 July 2026 with Trump confirmed to attend, an event US Secretary of State Rubio characterized as “probably the most important meeting in NATO’s history.” A transactional bilateral agenda runs underneath it. Trump raised the Halki Orthodox seminary, and Erdogan ordered reopening talks on 21 June. The S-400 and F-35 file remains the standing lever: Turkey’s purchase of the Russian system triggered US sanctions and its removal from the F-35 program in 2019, and Washington has floated F-35 reentry as a possible summit incentive, a card it holds over Ankara without having to make a direct Israel ask. On 25 May, Trump named Turkey among the states that should sign the Abraham Accords as part of an Iran peace framework, and Ankara has not responded favorably.

This track is the bounding mechanism for every front except the trade embargo, and it works because Ankara wants what it offers more than it wants direct action against Israel. Turkey needs Western capital and a stable lira, the F-35 reentry is a capability and prestige prize

the leadership bid can use, and a successful NATO summit on Turkish soil is a domestic legitimacy win. Against that, direct kinetic action against Israel would buy Ankara little the rhetoric does not already deliver and would cost it all of the above. So Erdogan runs the two audiences at once: maximal anti-Israel posture for the domestic base and the Sunni world, operational restraint for Washington. The two hold together only while no single demand forces them into contradiction. The Abraham Accords ask is that demand. A normalization step toward Israel is politically impossible for Erdogan to grant on domestic grounds and diplomatically costly to refuse to Trump's face, which is why how and whether Washington presses it around the summit is the decisive near-term variable. The two governments hold no ambassador-level ties, Turkey having recalled its ambassador in 2024, and no quiet bilateral channel for red-line communication with Israel is confirmed outside the technical Syria deconfliction line. No direct Turkish statement toward Israel registers after the 18 June Islamabad memorandum came into force.

Strategic Assessment

Turkey's posture toward Israel has moved from opposition expressed in rhetoric to a structural contest for the post-war Levant order, and the contest is a bid to occupy the regional leadership and patron space that Iran's defeat vacated. It is executed in trade since 2024, fought most dangerously in Syria since early 2025, escalated in doctrine since 10 June, and bounded below sustained kinetic risk by a parallel US track and a tacit Syrian deconfliction ceiling. Syria is where the contest is live and where a clash is closest. Lebanon sits at the contest's exposed future edge, named as an interest but not yet built into a footprint.

Assessment 1 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Turkey's hardening toward Israel is a structural posture shift, not the latest turn of the rupture-and-normalization cycle. The relationship ruptured in 2010 and 2018 and normalized within a few years each time, and through every prior cycle trade and the structural ties held. Two facts present now have no precedent in those cycles: a trade embargo Ankara has carried at one-sided, multi-billion-dollar cost since 2024 and is still tightening, and a physical Turkish military footprint in Syria that only became possible after Assad's fall. A reversible rhetorical cycle does not sever the economic spine or build a year-old militarized contest. Confidence is HIGH because the embargo and the Syria footprint are observed, costly, and load-bearing, and because the reference class makes the test explicit: the call would weaken if Ankara signaled normalization, and no such signal is present.

Assessment 2 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Syria is the sharpest and most immediate point of direct Turkey-Israel military contact, and a single technical channel is what separates the contest from a clash. Both militaries

operate inside Syria on incompatible terms, Turkey building toward a permanent air presence and Israel striking to deny it, including the T4 and Palmyra strikes aimed squarely at a Turkish deployment plan. The Baku-brokered hotline functions as a tacit ceiling both sides observe despite having no diplomatic relations, but it is technical only and would not survive a Turkish air-defense system going operational against Israeli strike corridors. Confidence is HIGH because the contest, the denial strikes, and the channel are all observed, and the channel's own existence measures how real the contact risk is.

Assessment 3 HIGH CONFIDENCE

Israel's response to Turkey is shaped by an instrument gap, not by a shortfall of will. The toolkit Israel ran against Iran, strikes on a nuclear program, assassination, foreign-soil interdiction, depends on conditions Turkey does not present, and direct pressure on a NATO ally would damage Israel's standing with Washington more than it would cost Ankara. Israel has therefore substituted containment by denial and by alignment: striking Turkish-linked infrastructure in Syria, assembling the Greece-Cyprus trilateral against the maritime claim, and leaning on Washington rather than on instruments of its own. Confidence is HIGH because the pattern is consistent across three fronts and follows directly from Turkey's status, which is fixed.

Assessment 4 MEDIUM CONFIDENCE

The confrontation stays bounded below sustained kinetic contact by Ankara's design and the US track Washington holds open, but the bound is conditional, not structural. Erdogan runs maximal posture and operational restraint together because the US track delivers capital, the F-35 file, and a summit on Turkish soil that direct action against Israel would forfeit, and the two postures hold only while no demand forces a choice between them. The Abraham Accords ask is the demand that would force it, impossible to grant on domestic grounds and costly to refuse to Trump directly. Confidence is MEDIUM because the bounding holds today but rests on variables, the deconfliction ceiling and the US track, that the next 90 days will test.

Assessment 5 MEDIUM CONFIDENCE

Lebanon is the contest's most exposed future edge and a double-edged opening for Lebanese actors, not its current flashpoint. Beirut's inclusion positions Ankara as a declared stakeholder in Lebanon's external alignment at the moment that alignment is being recast around a degraded Iran axis and a Gulf-US reconstruction track, and a Turkish pole offers the Sunni bloc maneuver room without a disarmament precondition. The same pole cuts against the disarmament-for-reconstruction bargain and would import the Turkey-Israel contest, because Ankara's framing accommodates Hezbollah rather

than dismantling it, while Turkish activity remains soft power with no security footprint. Confidence is MEDIUM because the Turkish interest is declared and probed but not built, and the collision risk is conditional on Ankara operationalizing it.

An alternative explanation holds that Turkey uses Israel as a convenient foil for unrelated aims, Syria reconstruction, Eastern Mediterranean claims, defense exports, and the Kurdish file. That line is less consistent with a trade embargo Ankara has carried at one-sided cost for over two years and with a militarized contest in Syria that drew Israeli denial strikes well before the June speech. A foil would not justify a multi-billion-dollar annual sacrifice or a contest over airbases that predates the rhetoric by a year. A second alternative, the stronger one, holds that this is another reversible Erdogan rhetorical cycle of the 2010 and 2018 type, inflamed for the AKP base and bound to normalize once the electoral and summit incentives shift. The reference class gives that line real weight, and it would gain decisively on any Turkish normalization signal. The evidence currently favors the structural reading because the two markers that broke from the cycle, the severed trade spine and the physical Syria footprint, are sunk costs that prior cycles never incurred and that an actor planning to reverse would not have paid. The residual risk the cyclical line correctly flags is that domestic politics, not strategy, is the prime driver, which would make the posture more reversible after the electoral cycle than the structural reading implies.

The contest moves along one of three paths over the next 90 days, ranked by likelihood.

Managed confrontation MOST LIKELY PATH

Maximal rhetoric and indirect contest are sustained through the NATO summit. The trade embargo holds, the Syria deconfliction ceiling holds, Lebanon stays a declared interest without a footprint, no direct Turkey-Israel kinetic action occurs, and the Abraham Accords ask is deflected rather than refused outright. Ankara holds the US track and the anti-Israel posture in parallel, conceding neither, because the two-level game pays only while it avoids the forced choice.

Hardening LOWER LIKELIHOOD

A Turkish air-defense system goes operational at T4, an Israeli strike hits a Turkish-flagged asset in Syria, a US normalization ask is publicly refused, or a first Turkish security step reaches toward Lebanon. Any one moves the contest from managed to overt, stresses or breaks the deconfliction ceiling, deepens the Syria footprint, and freezes parts of the US track.

Transactional thaw LOWEST LIKELIHOOD

The summit brokers a US-mediated lowering of the temperature, most plausibly an upgrade of the Syria deconfliction understanding into something broader, with Ankara trading rhetorical restraint for tangible US concessions. A move toward normalization, or any easing of the trade embargo, would be the strongest confirmation, would vindicate the cyclical reading over the structural one, and is not currently signaled.

Indicators to Monitor

- Turkey takes or publicly refuses an Israel-normalization position at or within 14 days of the 7-8 July NATO Ankara summit. Refusal points to Hardening. Deferral confirms Managed confrontation. Any move toward normalization points to Transactional thaw and to the cyclical reading.
- A Turkish air-defense system becomes operational at the T4/Tiyas or Palmyra airbase, or any direct Turkey-Israel intercept or incident occurs in Syrian airspace within 90 days. Either points to Hardening and tests the deconfliction ceiling.
- The Baku deconfliction channel is publicly invoked, suspended, or breaks down, or an Israeli strike hits a Turkish-flagged asset or Turkish personnel in Syria. Channel stress is the leading indicator of direct Syria risk.
- Turkish ground or advisory presence expands at a named Syrian reconstruction or air-base node in the Aleppo-Damascus-Homs corridor. Confirms the perimeter doctrine is operational.
- Any Turkey-specific security or reconstruction arrangement toward Lebanon, beyond the humanitarian and mediation soft power already observed, or acceptance of the Turkish offer to mediate the Hezbollah file, within 90 days. Moves KJ-06 from declared to observed and activates the forward Lebanon risk.
- The Washington Israel-Lebanon withdrawal track concludes, stalls, or admits a Turkish role. Any Turkish insertion into it activates the forward Lebanon risk.
- The trade embargo moves. Any Turkish step to resume or quietly ease trade with Israel points to Transactional thaw and to the cyclical reading. A further tightening of enforcement points to Hardening and confirms the structural reading.
- The reported Mossad-Kurdish arms program is confirmed as a permanent halt or as resumed. A halt points to US accommodation of Ankara. Resumption points to Hardening.
- The Blue Homeland legislation passes the Turkish parliament, or an Israel-Greece-Cyprus trilateral exercise draws a Turkish naval response. The maritime front activates.
- Egypt-Turkey defense cooperation moves from exercises to a standing arrangement, whether basing, joint command, or procurement. A structural deepening of the regional bloc and of the Sunni-leadership bid.



CORE GROUP

Date Issued: 23 June 2026

Prepared By: Core Group —
Strategic Analysis Unit



ABOUT CORE GROUP

Core Group is a Beirut-based strategic foresight house. We produce decision-ready analysis and advisory for governments, diplomatic institutions, and strategic investors navigating Middle Eastern complexity. Our work integrates structured analytical products, applied strategic advisory, and analysis-informed mediation; delivered on daily and weekly cycles calibrated to the speed at which the situation changes.

We are based in Beirut. In environments where official data is systematically unreliable and remote analysis inherits every distortion in its source material, physical proximity is not a logistical convenience but an epistemological foundation of our methodology. We verify what others can only estimate.