Turkey and Arab states line up with Israel over Syria, repression of Palestinians

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Israel's housing ministry is planning to build 55,000 new homes in an area of the West Bank and create two new settlements near Bethlehem and in the Jordan Valley.

According to a report by Peace Now, which obtained the state documents through Israel's freedom of information laws, in yet another breach of international law, the housing ministry secretly hired architects to plan homes near the Ma'ale Adumim settlement near Jerusalem, in the E1 area of the West Bank. Plans for more than 8,000 homes in E1 were cancelled in 2013 after pressure from Washington.

Israeli construction in E1 would connect Ma'ale Adumim and Pisgat Ze'ev, surround East Jerusalem completely, and sever any geographical contiguity in the West Bank.

The revelation comes as Israel continues its brutal crackdown on the Palestinians. Its security forces have killed more than 140 Palestinians, injuring hundreds more since October 1. This contrasts with 21 Israelis killed. In the last two weeks, Israeli forces have carried at least 185 military incursions into Palestinian communities in the West Bank and 8 in occupied East Jerusalem, and arrested at least 130 Palestinian civilians, including 28 children and 4 women, mostly in East Jerusalem.

While the majority of Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition wants to bring about the collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and rule over the Palestinians in what would in effect be an apartheid state, the security services and the army have opposed this.

Netanyahu, falling in line with the warning from US Secretary of State John Kerry against dissolving the PA, said he does not want the PA to collapse for fear of worse alternatives that might harm Israel's security. Kerry fears that the collapse of the PA would expose the utter fraud of the so-called two-state solution and cut across US plans for further military interventions in the region in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests.

The start of the crackdown in October coincided with Russia's direct military intervention in Syria. In response, Washington's regional allies have strengthened their relations with Israel.

Egypt, which has for years enforced Israel's blockade of 1.8 million Palestinians in Gaza, has tightened its blockade while voting for the first time ever on November 1 in favour of Israel at the United Nations in support of Israel's bid for membership of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

Shortly thereafter, Kuwaiti commentator Saleh al-Shayeji published an op-ed piece declaring that Israel is not "our enemy," and the United Arab Emirates approved the opening of an Israeli diplomatic mission in Abu Dhabi.

Saudi Arabia has held open as well as secret meetings with Israeli officials, who have made public declarations about Israel's warm relations with its "Sunni Arab allies" in Tel Aviv's bid to become a "sleeping partner" in the Sunni Arab axis against Iran. Israel's Sunni allies now once again include Turkey, which has close relations with Riyadh.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an made a state visit to Riyadh a few days ago, just two weeks after signing an agreement with Tel Aviv to restore diplomatic relations as a first step towards normalising ties. Commenting in the Turkish media Saturday, Erdogan said, "Israel is in need of a country like Turkey in the region. … And we too must accept that we need Israel. This is a reality in the region. If mutual steps are implemented based on sincerity, then normalisation will follow."

The diplomatic moves follow years of strained relations after Turkey's very public row with Israel when Erdo?an, prime minister at the time, stormed out of a public meeting at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009 over Israel's 2008-2009 assault on Gaza, posturing as a

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friend of the Palestinians.

He broke off relations in 2010, after Israel's capture of the passenger ship Mavi Marmara, which sought to break Israel's blockade of Gaza, and killing of nine Turkish citizens. But behind the public spat, trade between the two countries flourished, rising from $3.44 billion in 2010 to $5.83 billion in 2014, and continues to increase.

Both countries covertly supported Islamist rebel groups against President Bashar al-Assad. They both tried—and failed—to get a robust US military intervention in Syria in a coalition with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan. Opposed to any possible US rapprochement with Iran, which should see some sanctions against Iran lifted early in 2016, they fear that their proxies are being decimated by Russian forces and are likely to be designated as "terrorist groups"—excluded from the UN-sponsored "peace deal" in Syria which may further work against their interests. Much to Turkey's anger, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has not been designated as a terrorist group because the US has forged alliances with related Kurdish separatist forces in Iraq and Syria.

Ankara is becoming increasingly embroiled in the war in Syria, having backed Islamist forces to unseat Assad and prevent the establishment of a separate autonomous region for Syria's Kurds that would encourage Turkey's own Kurds to secede from Turkey. This has reignited Turkey's civil war against the PKK, in Turkey, destabilising the country, which has seen the influx of nearly 2 million Syrian refugees, most of whom are living in desperate conditions.

Tel Aviv for its part had sought to work with Russia, and create a buffer inside Syrian territory under the control of proxy groups near the Golan Heights. This would in turn allow it to retain the land captured from Syria in 1967 and exploit its newly found energy resources. However, it has become increasingly concerned that Moscow's intervention has bolstered Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group supporting Syrian government forces in the savage sectarian war.

In both Israel and Turkey, economic growth has slowed as a result of the recession in Europe. Israel's economy has faltered since its war on Gaza in 2014 and amid the ongoing Palestinian unrest. Turkey has suffered from the disruption to its regional trade as a result of the wars in Iraq and Syria, and the military coup in Egypt that unseated Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Mursi, who had agreed to a transportation deal between the Turkish port of Mersin and Egypt's Port Said.

Both countries are seeking to take advantage of the recent discovery of offshore gas in the eastern Mediterranean that is expected to provide Israel with enough gas for its own domestic use and for export. With its main market in Europe, which is trying to reduce its dependence on gas imports from Russia, and potentially Turkey, its supply route could likely involve a gas pipeline via Turkey. In addition, Turkey is hoping to reopen the Ro-Ro ferry link between its port at ?skenderun and Haifa in Israel, which has been little used since it opened in 2012 due to the earlier rupture between Turkey and Israel.

Netanyahu's government has just given the go-ahead for a long-delayed deal that will allow an American-Israeli consortium to develop a major offshore gas field, breaching its own anti-monopoly laws to do so.

It has militarised its waters and those of Gaza, where in 2000 significant gas reserves were discovered, and restricted Gaza's maritime zone to three to six nautical miles beyond the coast, inflicting further hardship on Gaza's fishermen. Since 2014, all Palestinian fishing boats sailing within seven miles of drilling platforms have been intercepted, leading to frequent Israeli firing on fishermen.

A major factor in Israel's relations with Egypt is the purchase of Egyptian gas transported to Israel via a pipeline, constructed under Gaza's waters in 2005, that has supplied 40 percent of Israel's gas at a fraction of the market rate.

Israel is arming its navy with additional weaponry, signing a $470 million contract last May with Germany for four armed patrol vessels to guard its offshore gas rigs. Israel also signed a defence cooperation agreement with Greece's Syriza government to ensure "maritime security" in the eastern Mediterranean, which is beset with numerous intergovernmental conflicts over borders. It plans to install Iron Dome missile interceptors on its warships to protect its drilling platforms.

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