

A Decade of Close Greece-Israel Relations: An Assessment

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This article explores what lies behind the significant improvement in relations between Greece and Israel over the past decade. Greece and Israel have managed to move their relations forward in ways that would have been difficult to envision in the past, given Athens's strong pro-Palestinian stance and the close Israel-Turkey relationship in the 1990s. The article points to the energy-related, security-based, and economic motivations on both sides to move ahead with closer relations, and shows how these drives were strong enough to assist the sides to continue cooperation, despite notable changes in the political leadership in Greece.

Keywords: Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Turkey, Palestinians

The improvement in Israel-Greece relations that took place over the last decade is remarkable. Given the strong anti-Israel rhetoric employed in the early 1980s by Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu, such a change did not appear to be on the horizon. As Israeli political scientist Amikam Nachmani aptly put it, "Greece and Israel, so close geographically...during the first 40 years of Israel's existence could not have been farther apart in terms of diplomatic relations."¹ Public opinion in Greece toward Israel was also negative, due to anti-American feelings, given that Israel was seen as a protégé of the US;² the Palestinian issue; and the strong relations between Israel and Turkey in the 1990s, which made the Greeks suspicious about the common aspirations of these countries. According to comparative surveys conducted by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 2014 and 2015, anti-semitic perceptions in Greece were the highest in the non-

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Middle East and Northern Africa countries surveyed.³ Thus, in analyzing Israel-Greece relations, two puzzling phenomena are apparent. The first, as Greek political scientist Aristotle Tziampiris presents in his book on the emergence of Israeli-Greek cooperation, is the speed with which these relations were transformed.⁴ The second is that despite notable changes in the political leadership in Greece in recent years, relations with Israel have only grown stronger.

Overview

The genesis of the warming of relations lies in the efforts in 2009 of a group of Greek political advisors and a non-official Israeli counterpart, which Tziampiris named the Electra Group.⁵ Following the Electra Group's efforts, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak telephoned Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou (the son of former Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou), who later also spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In December 2009, Papandreou met with Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, and in February 2010, Papandreou and Netanyahu met at Café Pushkin in Moscow, a meeting that paved the way for the close relations that were soon to form between the two states.⁶

The flotilla incident in May 2010 evoked a Greek condemnation and caused the postponement of a joint military exercise, but the relations deepened when George Papandreou visited Israel in July 2010, the first visit of a Greek Prime Minister to Israel in three decades. In August 2010, Netanyahu made a reciprocal, historic visit to Athens – it was the first visit ever of an Israeli Prime Minister to Greece.

After a call between the Prime Ministers during the disastrous fire in Israel in December 2010, Greece sent help to Israel. The following spring, Greece assisted Israel in curtailing the sailing of the Freedom Flotilla II. Later, in September 2011, the Defense Ministers of both countries signed a memorandum of understanding between the ministries, and in October 2013, there was a first government-to-government meeting in Jerusalem. In September 2014, the Greek parliament passed a law forbidding the denial of the Holocaust, and in March 2017, it also voted in favor of granting Greek citizenship to descendants of Holocaust survivors from Greece.

Since 2012, a trilateral relationship has evolved between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, and the three countries now cooperate in numerous areas. January 2016 saw the first trilateral summit at the heads of state level; the fifth trilateral meeting between the Prime Ministers of Greece and Israel

and the President of Cyprus was held in Beersheba in December 2018, with the participation of US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman. It was agreed that a permanent secretariat for the coordination of tripartite cooperation mechanisms would be established in Nicosia and begin operating in July 2019. A sixth summit took place in Israel in March 2019, with the participation of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Main Areas of Cooperation

Energy

It is impossible to talk about energy cooperation between Israel and Greece without mentioning Cyprus. While the construction of a pipeline to transfer natural gas between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece seems unrealistic to many experts, in April 2017, the European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy and the four Energy Ministers of Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel revealed their plans for the Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) natural gas pipeline. This will be a 1,300 km offshore and 600 km onshore pipeline from Eastern Mediterranean natural gas sources off the Israeli coast to Cyprus, from Cyprus to Crete, from Crete to the Peloponnese, from there to western Greece, and then linked to another pipeline, the Poseidon, to Italy. The estimated cost of the project is \$6-7 billion.⁷ The initial research conducted by the Natural Gas Supplier Corporation (DEPA) of Greece showed that the project is technically feasible,⁸ and this was supported by the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) program and categorized as a Project of Common Interest (PCI) by the EU Commission.⁹ Beyond existing technical and economic considerations, it seems as if within the EU, objection to future additional funding for the pipeline may come from those who lobby for the development of renewable energies, and from Spain, which will see such a pipeline as competition.¹⁰ Also, despite the initial support from Italy for the project, domestic objections led the Italian government in March 2019 to press the sides to delay the signing of a formal agreement.¹¹

An alternative idea has been the construction of a cheaper (\$2.4-4 billion) 600 km underwater pipeline, to connect Israel with Turkey.¹² This alternative, however, faces two major problems. The first is that since Israel would like to avoid a situation of a pipeline in Lebanon and Syria's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), it prefers

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that the pipeline run through Cyprus's EEZ. However, the intractable conflict in Cyprus also makes that route highly problematic. The other problem is the state of relations between Israel and Turkey, including the deep mistrust between their leaders.¹³ Since it does not seem that Israel will be able to find a location to construct its own onshore LNG facility, there were talks of Israel using joint LNG facilities that would be built in Cyprus for its exports, but due to both the price of building such facilities and security concerns, this idea was not advanced. Israel and Cyprus are contemplating the idea of exporting gas via Egyptian LNG facilities, but Egyptian priorities related to its own natural gas discoveries may hinder this idea as well.

Beyond possible cooperation on the export of natural gas, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus are moving forward in the development of the EuroAsia Interconnector, which if materialized, will be an undersea bi-directional cable that will connect the electricity grids of Israel and Cyprus to Crete and mainland Greece (1518 km in length). The European Union has also categorized this project as a PCI, secured funding of 1.5 billion euros for the project, and viability studies have been concluded.¹⁴

The Security Realm

Cooperation in the security realm predated the noticeable warming of relations. The two countries signed their first defense cooperation agreement in December 1994 but did not move forward to implement it.¹⁵ It was in 2008 that Israel and Greece conducted the Glorious Spartan joint military exercise, which featured 80 Greek and 100 Israeli F-15 and F-16 aircraft. According to the international press, the exercise resembled a dress rehearsal for an attack on the nuclear facilities in Iran.¹⁶ Since then there have also been many bilateral drills. In June 2018, for example, 40 Israeli air force planes took part in an exercise with the Greek side. The aim of the exercise was to simulate a war on multiple fronts, including a bombing campaign against targets in the Gaza Strip.¹⁷

In 2014, for the first time, Israel appointed a military attaché to Athens. Until then, Israel-Greece military relations were managed by the Israeli attaché based in Romania.¹⁸ The Greek decision to send a defense attaché predated that of Israel.¹⁹ In 2015, the two states' Defense Ministers signed a "status of forces" agreement, whereby Greek and Israeli soldiers could be stationed either in Greece or in Israel to participate in military training exercises.²⁰ In March 2019 it was reported that Israel and Greece are building

a marine radar system in Crete.²¹ Due to Greece's difficult economic situation, arms purchases from Israel are limited in scope, but there have been some small deals.²²

Trade and Tourism

Israel and Greece are not big bilateral trading partners, but improved relations have resulted in growing commercial relations. While in 2010 bilateral trade amounted to \$412 million, in 2017 it reached \$610 million.²³ Due to the economic crisis in Greece and the subsequent austerity measures, it was difficult to promote trade relations beyond this level. However, in March 2018, an Israel-Greece Chamber of Commerce was launched.²⁴

There has also been a significant rise in the number of Israeli tourists visiting Greece. While in 2010 they numbered 150,000,²⁵ in 2018, 600,000 Israelis visited Greece, and it is expected that in 2019 the number will reach 700,000.²⁶ As Greece hosted more than 33 million tourists in 2018, this does not make Israel one of the top 10 source countries for tourists to Greece. However, tourism accounts for around a fifth of Greek GDP, and one tenth of the Greek population is employed in the tourism industry.²⁷ An indication for the importance of tourism in the closer relations is evidenced by the visit of Greek Minister of Tourism Elena Kountoura to the International Mediterranean Tourism Market (IMTM) exhibition in Israel in both 2017 and 2019.

Impetus behind the Growing Cooperation

Greece believed that Turkish secret services were involved in the 2010 flotilla incident,²⁸ which was thus seen as evidence of greater Turkish assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean. From Israel's perspective, the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations prompted a reconsideration of its regional realignment, since the close Turkey-Israel relations in the 1990s and early 2000s were one of the main pillars of Jerusalem's strategic outlook on the Middle East. Yet beyond the flotilla incident, there were additional warning signs that Turkey-Israel relations were not only a pale shadow of what they used to be, but were going downhill. These included Turkey's attempt with Brazil in May 2010 to broker a nuclear compromise with Iran, which resulted in both countries voting against sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council, and Turkey disclosing a spy ring in Iran working for Israel in 2012.²⁹

In addition, there were practical reasons for Israel to draw closer to Greece, such as a need for airspace for training after Turkey closed its airspace to the Israel Air Force in 2009. Moreover, the Arab upheaval, which began in December 2010, created a need in Jerusalem to avoid a situation of greater isolation, and that encouraged it to seek new partners. In this respect, closer Greek-Israeli relations could be seen as part of a reincarnation of the periphery doctrine.³⁰ The refugee crisis that resulted from the Syrian civil war also precipitated closer cooperation between Israel and Greece. The waves of refugees that arrived from Turkey to Greece in 2015 were seen by some Greeks as an intentional attempt by Ankara to create greater instability in the country.³¹

Clearly the global economic crisis of 2008 and the Greek debt crisis were factors in the need for Greece to rethink its policies. While Israel could not itself provide significant assistance, Netanyahu did try to convince European leaders to provide Greece with financial aid.³² Growing trade relations, as well as the sharp rise in the number of Israeli tourists coming to Greece, were also benefits (albeit limited) from Greece's perspective.

The natural gas discoveries were a strong impetus for closer collaboration, primarily between Israel and Cyprus, although Greece wanted to have an active role in this energy relationship. In addition, export options involving EU markets have made Greece an attractive option. This was even more so once it became clear that a pipeline from Israel to Turkey was increasingly less likely.

From Netanyahu's perspective, improved relations with Greece suit his broader belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be the main determinant of Israel's ability to form close relations with other actors.

While Greece was once one of Israel's strongest opponents in the European Union, the warming of Greek-Israel relations actually turned Greece into one of Israel's staunchest partners in the EU. Over time, Greece even began to diverge in part from the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy toward Israel.³³ Thus for example, in November 2015, following Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's visit in Israel, Greece informed Israel that it would defy European Commission guidelines on labeling goods produced in West Bank settlements.³⁴

Relations between Israel and Greece developed mainly at the initiative of Athens and Jerusalem. The Obama administration made efforts to repair relations between Turkey and Israel and was less enthusiastic about Greek-Israeli cooperation. The Turkish veto on

Israel-NATO cooperation paved the way, however, for joint US-Greek-Israeli military exercises, such as the Noble Dina annual naval exercises. Moreover, due to growing tensions between the US and Turkey, the Trump administration seems to envision more potential in the warming of relations between Israel and Greece, as evidenced, for example, by the presence of the US ambassador to Israel in the December 2018 trilateral meeting between Greek, Cypriot, and Israeli heads of state, and the participation of Secretary Pompeo in the March 2019 meeting. Moreover, there has been growing cooperation between Hellenic-American and Jewish-American organizations operating in Washington.³⁵

From the leaders' perspective, it seems that George Papandreou was interested in opening a new page in Greek-Israeli relations even before the flotilla incident, and used the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations as a way to explain the new policy to the Greek public. Former Israeli Ambassador to Greece Arye Mekel suggests that because of Papandreou's upbringing and education in the US, he absorbed some of the positive attitude toward Israel in the US. Mekel also claims that Papandreou wanted Greece to have a growing role in the East Mediterranean and that he understood that for this Greece needs to have close relations not only with the Arab world but with Israel as well.³⁶

Papandreou's suggestion of a referendum on Greece's acceptance of the Eurozone bailout plan was understood as a referendum over a Grexit. It was greeted with harsh criticism, did not take place, and Papandreou was forced to resign in November 2011. Greece's new Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras, continued Papandreou's policy toward Israel, since despite being from a different political party, he also believed that a more balanced policy toward the Middle East was needed. Samaras was the Greek Foreign Minister when Athens upgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to full ambassadorial level in 1990 (the last European Economic Community [EEC] member to do so), which may also help explain his positive attitude toward warming relations with Israel.³⁷

Alexis Tsipras's assumption of the Prime Minister's Office in January 2015 (followed by his confirmation in the snap September 2015 elections) initially caused concern in Jerusalem, since many of the members of his far-left Syriza party hold strong pro-Palestinian views. Prior to his election, Tsipras himself criticized Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, and the party had previously voiced its objection to the 2010 Netanyahu visit to Greece and criticized the way the government assisted Israel in curtailing

the Freedom Flotilla II. In the Syriza platform, there was even a call to stop the defense cooperation with Israel.³⁸ However, Israeli fears of a chill in relations did not materialize for several reasons. First, Syriza needed a coalition partner to form a government, and that partner was in favor of a continued relationship with Israel. Second, the refugee flow into Greece increased the sense of crisis within Greece and the fear of malign Turkish intentions. Third, the prospect and later the signing of the normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey only encouraged Greece to strengthen its formal ties with Israel. Lastly, Tsipras had hopes that he might mediate between Israel and the Palestinians.

From Netanyahu's perspective, improved relations with Greece suited his broader belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be the main determinant of Israel's ability to form close relations with other actors. According to this approach, Israel could considerably expand its relationships despite a lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In his view (and even some of his sharp critics agree with him on this issue), he has managed to advance Israel significantly in the diplomatic arena.³⁹ Netanyahu also had an ambivalent stance toward the normalization process with Turkey, and while he ultimately consented to the agreement, his mistrust of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remained and prompted him to strengthen ties and forge closer relations with Greece and Cyprus.⁴⁰ Foreign Minister and later Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman was also an advocate of the "bypass Ankara axis."⁴¹

Conclusions and a Look Ahead

The fact that the positive change in Greek policy toward Israel survived the political reversals in Greece, and that different Prime Ministers have not only continued their predecessor's policy but have even pushed the positive agenda forward, has been very encouraging from Jerusalem's perspective. There is also no reason to suspect, regardless of the political outcome of the general elections in Israel and Greece in 2019, that the countries will not continue this relationship in the near term. At the same time, Israel has a history of close relationships, e.g., with Iran, South Africa, and Turkey, that ended in major crises.

Warming relations between Israel and Greece reflected uneasiness with Turkey's growing assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean. When Turkey and Israel signed the normalization agreement in 2016, it seemed as if Israel might be less enthusiastic about advancing its relations with Greece

further. However, Turkish-Israeli rivalry persisted, and following the May 2018 crisis between Turkey and Israel around the events in Gaza and the US embassy move to Jerusalem, it seems as if Ankara is not planning to moderate its negative attitude toward Israel. There does, however, seem to be an effort on the part of Ankara and Athens to relieve some of their tensions, as was evident in the December 2017 historic visit of Erdogan to Greece (the first visit of a Turkish president to Greece in 65 years), and the February 2019 visit of Tsipras to Turkey. While Erdogan's visit was marked by several statements that were problematic from a Greek perspective, such as his talk of a need for revisions in the 1923 Lausanne treaty, Tsipras's 2019 visit was more successful.

The warming of Greek-Israeli relations was also closely related to the weakness of Greece resulting from debt crisis and the austerity measures. After several debt relief programs, the Greek economy has stabilized somewhat, and this may reduce the diplomatic need for the connection with Israel. Still, an expanding Greek economy might mean greater trade with Israel. Moreover, the signing and passing in the Greek Parliament of the Prespa agreement on the dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the latter's name has also enhanced Greek prestige in the European Union and in NATO.

From the outset, it was clear that warmer relations did not mean a military alliance in the sense that Israel would come to the assistance of Greece or Cyprus in case of a military conflict with Turkey, nor would Greece or Cyprus take an active military role in support of Israel. Hence, the extent to which relations in the military realm can be further developed is clearly limited. For its part, energy is not only a basis for cooperation; it can also cause disagreements. Yossi Langotsky, a leading Israeli geologist who predicted the discovery of major natural gas reserves off Israel's shores, is now very pessimistic about the future. He has advised Israel against the export of any gas until more reserves are discovered.⁴² Even if Israel maintains its current natural gas export plans, the chances of the realization of the EastMed pipeline still seem questionable. Israel and Cyprus also have to solve their joint development dispute in relation to the Aphrodite reservoir and Ishai (Aphrodite's continuation

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in Israeli territories). The two governments allowed the companies involved to try to solve this issue, but if they fail to come to an agreement, the governments will agree to an international arbitrator. The extended delay with regard to Cypriot energy plans has already caused frustration on the Greek-Cypriot side, and in case of further delays, the relationship between Israel and Greece might also be affected.

Thus, all factors that brought the sides closer in the past decade are still highly relevant, but the question marks that existed before nevertheless remain, and new points of disagreement seem likely to arise. However, what does potentially promise this relationship more longevity than what appeared a decade ago is the fact that the parties have made efforts to institutionalize it in many areas, and reversing course will therefore be more difficult.

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