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The Prospects for Greek-Israeli Relations: A View from Athens

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The early 1990s witnessed a visible improvement of Greco-Israeli relations, although the further strengthening of relations between Athens and Tel-Aviv was prevented by the development of a strong strategic partnership between Israel and Turkey. Unfortunately, at that time (mid-1990s) Athens adopted a zero sum game approach, forcing Israel to choose between Turkey and Greece. It should not have been surprising that Israeli interests with Turkey were perceived by Tel-Aviv as more important than those with Greece.

It wasn't until 2010 that the situation changed again, with an impressive thaw in bilateral relations, as the result of three factors: (a) The rising tensions in relations between Ankara and Tel-Aviv, which forced Israel to seek, if not a replacement, then at least an alternative regional partner, in an effort to increase its strategic depth in the Eastern Mediterranean; (b) The rapprochement with Greece was useful for Tel-Aviv also in the context of Israel's increasing isolation in the West as a result of the Netanyahu government's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians;ⁱ and (c) Athens's urgent need to acquire a role in its southern neighborhood, increase Greece's strategic value and seek a range of potential benefits (bilateral cooperation in the economic, defence/security, and tourism sectors, as well as support from the Jewish lobby, which is quite influential both in Congress but also in Wall Street). Developments in Egypt and the prospect of a government in Cairo that may be less accommodating to Israeli security needs and concerns, as well as the civil war in Syria, the possibility of instability in Jordan and the Lebanon, and Iran's nuclear programme, have reinforced that perception of a deteriorating regional security environment for Israel and the need for extra-regional alliances (it should be noted that Israel has been implementing its so-called "peripheral strategy" since the early years of its existence). It is not clear, however, whether Israel has drawn the necessary conclusions regarding the need to re-consider its policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

A new variable has been inserted to the region's already complex security equation. In addition to the Middle East's traditional sources of hydrocarbons, a new one has appeared. It is hoped that the discovery of significant natural gas deposits in the exclusive economic zones of Israel and Cyprus and the -as yet unconfirmed- much larger deposits of the Levant Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean may provide an additional energy source outside the former Soviet space and the Middle East proper and therefore contribute to the diversification of Europe's natural gas suppliers.ⁱⁱ

Israel's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas bonanza include its energy security, direct economic benefits, and the cementing of its relations with Greece and Cyprus. Regarding energy security, Israel strongly wishes to eliminate its dependence on Egypt or any other Arab energy suppliers in view of the domestic political changes and the uncertainty about the future of Egyptian [and Arab]-Israeli relations.

The evolving energy cooperation between Israel and Cyprus, with Greece as a potential third partner, is a new element in regional politics in the Eastern Mediterranean and a source of friction with Turkey, which has been strongly opposed to the exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits discovered in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Cyprus for reasons also related to its objective of becoming a regional energy hub.ⁱⁱⁱ Although it has taken a small step back from Prime Minister Erdogan's initially very strong rhetoric, Ankara's current policies have been described by analysts as "gunboat diplomacy" and are characterized by rather limited little consideration for the

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related provisions of international law. The situation may deteriorate further as the Republic of Cyprus, desperately seeking new sources of income to deal with the consequences of its financial problems, is granting additional exploration licenses to international energy companies and Turkey continues to perceive the problem as a zero sum game situation.

The deterioration of relations with Turkey has been considered as an undesired development for Israel, which felt that, despite the differences, it had significant common strategic interests with Turkey and had no desire to add Turkey to its already long list of active enemies. For those reasons, it had been seeking an improvement of relations with Turkey^{iv}, even though it was well aware that a return to the *status quo ante* was all but impossible.^v However, in addition to Prime Minister Erdogan and much of the Turkish population's strong feelings about Gaza and the Palestinian question in general^{vi}, Ankara apparently perceived a political clash with Israel as beneficial and even necessary in order to increase its popularity and influence in the Arab/Muslim world.^{vii} As a result, Israeli decision-makers have been feeling increasingly uneasy with Turkey's AKP government. The above-mentioned discovery of substantial natural gas deposits in Cyprus's EEZ and energy cooperation with Israel further complicated relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

Although with both Erdogan and Netanyahu remaining in power in their respective countries, a normalization of relations appeared quite difficult, with Avigdor Lieberman temporarily (?) out of active politics, the fence-mending effort became possible after direct American involvement at the highest level. This was to be expected as there are important security concerns that require some form of cooperation between Israel and Turkey (primarily in order to manage Syria's possible disintegration and the fate of its chemical and biological weapons, but also a in the case of a military conflict involving Iran, should diplomatic negotiations fail to produce an acceptable solution).

It should come as no surprise that the recent apology of PM Netanyahu to Turkey for the death of Turkish citizens at the Mavi Marmara incident and the expected gradual improvement of Israeli-Turkish caused disappointment to those believing that an alliance between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, based on the perception of a common enemy, would constitute a 'shield' vis-à-vis Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to another, more pragmatic, school of thought, this trilateral cooperation could have substantial potential benefits for all sides involved but would not by itself provide an answer to all foreign policy challenges that Greece and Cyprus are currently being faced with. To be viable, such cooperation should move away from any notion on an axis against a specific country and the logic of a zero sum game situation, and be based on common interests that the three sides involved should define as soon as possible.

If one accepts the inherent logic of the second school of thought, the reasons for strategic cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus remain important, despite the serious economic problems and the resulting weakened position of the Republic of Cyprus and the efforts for an, at least, partial improvement of Israeli-Turkish relations.^{viii} In any case, Israel's foreign policy and security institutions are characterized from a certain –not completely unjustified– 'paranoia' and strong mistrust towards third parties in general and Islamic regimes in particular, which will probably prevent the full normalization of relations with an Islamic Turkey (despite the wishes and strong encouragement of the U.S.). Furthermore, the nascent Turkish-Israeli rapprochement process will be tested in the next Palestinian crisis in Gaza.^{ix}

According to a knowledgeable observer of regional dynamics, "trade between them is booming. With the diplomatic détente, the export of Israeli gas to and through Turkey might become feasible".^x Indeed, Israeli foreign policy is highly pragmatic on most issues and, despite its unequivocal statements re-affirming energy cooperation with Cyprus, it could conceivably accept some kind of compromise regarding hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean, provided its basic objectives are satisfied to a considerable extent. It is difficult to imagine,

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however, that Israel will entrust its central energy corridor to Europe to a country like Turkey, with a dynamic and rather controversial (at least from an Israeli perspective)^{xi} regional agenda, and will make its energy exports conditional on good relations with Ankara, stability in Syria and Lebanon –in the case of a land-pipeline- or the resolution of the Cyprus problem, in the case of an underwater pipeline.

This is not to say, of course, that one should not explore the possible positive impact of Cypriot natural gas discoveries in efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem (although the prospects for meaningful negotiations have been dealt a serious blow as a result of the clumsy management of the Cypriot financial crisis by EU authorities, which significantly weakened President Anastasiadis, a well-known moderate). Seeking cooperative solutions with the participation of Turkey should not be perceived as a taboo subject.^{xii} However, there are a number of important preconditions. For example, Prime Minister Erdogan recently referred to possible win-win solutions for Greece and Turkey in the hydrocarbons issue. But joint exploitation could only be discussed if maritime boundaries are clearly defined. Would Turkey be prepared to agree to take the issue to an International Court (Hague or Hamburg)? Or in the Cyprus issue, would Ankara be prepared to change its current policy of not talking to the Greek Cypriots and meet unofficially with them to explore various options?

Such developments would certainly be welcomed but in the meantime important decisions should be taken. A major dilemma currently facing Israeli decision-makers is how much gas to export and to which destination: Europe, Asia or both? Also, how should surplus gas be exported: via pipeline or LNG plant? If the former, to Greece or, as recently suggested, via Turkey? If the latter (which also offers more flexibility in exports), where it will be built? The option of an LNG facility on Israel's Mediterranean coast appears to be gaining ground, but no final decision has been taken yet. Although such plans will not be implemented until at least 2017, decisions have to be made much earlier.^{xiii}

Israel's energy choices –and the results of energy explorations in all three involved countries- will shape to a considerable degree the nature and depth of the strategic relationship between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. The strategic value of Greece and Cyprus for Israel is still relatively high, but those three countries will have to define the parameters of their strategic cooperation on the basis of common interests and realistic expectations.

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ⁱ Greece remains critical of the Netanyahu government's policies on the Palestinian issue but its related statements have become more nuanced. Keeping in mind its traditional good relationship with the Palestinians, Athens has tried to maintain a balanced position on related issues, voting in favour of Palestinian membership to UNESCO and observer status at the United Nations, but preventing in 2011 the departure from Greek ports of a flotilla to Gaza.

ⁱⁱ Although the deposits discovered so far in Cyprus and Israel are not expected to have a transforming effect on Europe's energy situation, they can hardly be ignored as long as Europe continues to voice concerns about its energy security.

ⁱⁱⁱ Saban Kardas, *Energy in Turkey's International Affairs and the Race for Southern Corridor*, On Turkey, German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 19, 2013, p. 1.

^{iv} Galia Linderstraus, *Spring is in the Air? On the Thawing of Turkey-Israel Relations*, INSS Insight No. 415, April, 3, 2013, p. 1.

^v According to Sir Michael Leigh, "Turkey and Israel are unlikely to return to the halcyon days of diplomatic and military cooperation" (*Cyprus Bailout and Israel-Turkey Détente Present New Opportunities*, Transatlantic Takes, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 26, 2013, p. 2). Bulent Aras also argues that "there is no prospect for a honeymoon between Turkey and Israel in the foreseeable future, but there is reason for hope of a working relationship in the short run". (Bulent Aras, *Turkish-Israeli Relations after the Apology*, On Turkey Analysis, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 12, 2013, p. 3)

^{vi} Aras, p. 2; See also, *Turkey's Crises over Israel and Iran*, International Crisis Group report, September 2010, pp. 2-3.

^{vii} According to Alexander Murinson, "...Turkey emboldened by the ouster of pro-Western leaders in the region... envisions itself as a revitalized master of the region once ruled by its Ottoman predecessors prior to the dissolution of the empire... As the fall of the Alawite regime in Syria seems imminent, Syria and Lebanon are likely to join the Turkey-inspired [Sunni] bloc". (Alexander Murinson, *Strategic Realignment and Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Perspectives Papers on Current Affairs, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, January 9, 2012, p. 1)

^{viii} Michael Leigh agrees with that assessment but offers a slightly more pessimistic view, arguing that "Turkey's détente with Israel need not be at the expense of Israel's energy cooperation with Cyprus... Israel, Cyprus and Greece will continue to work together but are unlikely to form an alternative energy corridor or strategic alignment in the Mediterranean". (Leigh, p. 2)

^{ix} As Bulent Aras points out, "if the Netanyahu government wants a durable normalization with Turkey, the foremost condition is to adapt a constructive attitude in Israeli policy toward the Palestinians". (Aras, p. 2)

^x Leigh, p. 2.

^{xi} According to a leading Israeli analyst, "A combination of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamist-Jihadist impulses has placed Turkey into an aggressive stance on several regional issues". (Ephraim Inbar, *The Threats in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea*, Perspectives Papers on Current Affairs, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, November 24, 2011, p. 2)

^{xii} See for example the concept of "triangular peace dividend in Eastern Mediterranean". (Kardas, p. 3)

^{xiii} Simon Henderson, *Energy Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean: Source for Cooperation or Fuel for Tension? The Case of Israel*, Policy Brief, Eastern Mediterranean Energy Project, German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2012, p. 1.