



Greece and Israeli-Turkish relations

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Summary

This essay focuses on the multidimensional nature of Greek-Israeli relations. The understanding of the depth of these relations can explain why the two countries – along with Cyprus – are interested in coming closer. On the other hand, the effort of Israel and Turkey to normalize bilateral ties – already under way since 2016 – is a logical development that deserves attention. However, it is not related to the future evolution of Greek-Israeli collaboration.

- The evolution of Greek-Israeli relations in the last decade and trilateral Greece-Israel-Cyprus summits outline the common interest of the three countries to enrich their cooperation.
- Israel and Turkey have started since 2016 to normalize their relations. This is an ongoing process that has evolved in a period during which Greece, Israel and Cyprus charted a joint course in the Eastern Mediterranean.
- Israel and Turkey are expected to find a modus vivendi by agreeing on some issues and disagreeing on others.
- A potential Turkish-Israeli collaboration against Iran in Syria might pave the way for new synergies between Israel and Turkey. This is a highly controversial and complicated matter that entails risks for Ankara.

“The relationship between Greece and Israel has grown significantly over recent years covering the fields of economy, defense, science, technology, energy, tourism and culture, whereas diaspora communities have played a critical role in cementing the friendship”

GREECE AND ISRAEL have celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of full diplomatic relations. According to a joint statement issued by Presidents Katerina Sakellaropoulou and Reuven Rivlin on 21 May 2020 the relationship has grown significantly over recent years covering the fields of economy, defense, science, technology, energy, tourism and culture, whereas diaspora communities have played a critical role in cementing the friendship.¹ In a video call on the same day, Prime Ministers Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Benjamin Netanyahu noted the importance of Constantinos Mitsotakis' 1990 decision to recognize Israel and discussed aspects of collaboration including the advancement of the EastMed pipeline.² The Israeli Ambassador to Greece Yossi Amrani also concentrated on the richness of bilateral ties and bright perspectives for the future in his remarks during an online event organized by ELIAMEP.³

Although the decision of Constantinos Mitsotakis had been taken in 1990, it took twenty years for Greece and Israel to practically come closer. The gradual deterioration of relations between Israel and Turkey since December 2008 and the Mavi Marmara event of May 2010 led Netanyahu to embark on an attempt to reshape his country's policies in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴ Then Premier George Papandreou was keen in obtaining Israeli support during a particularly tough and unpredictable period for the Greek economy.⁵ This is how it started. The two leaders first met in Moscow in February 2010 and six months later, in August, Netanyahu landed in Athens and met Papandreou. The experience from the last decade suggests that the more the two countries were talking to each other, the deeper their collaboration could emerge.⁶ Cyprus also became part of a successful tripartite mechanism. By the beginning of 2020 seven tripartite summits had already taken place.

While Greek-Israeli relations are flourishing, Israel and Turkey are making efforts to improve their ties. The process started in 2016 – when the two countries signed a deal to normalize ties⁷ – and is currently developing. In the view of President Erdogan, Israel and Turkey ‘need each other’.⁸ Progress has been rather slow because some obstacles cannot be easily overcome. Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians⁹ and Turkey's alleged support

¹ Joint Statement of President Katerina Sakellaropoulou and President Reuven Rivlin, available at: <http://www.presidency.gr/en/joint-statement-of-president-katerina-sakellaropoulou-and-president-reuven-rivlin/>, 21 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

² ‘PM Netanyahu Holds Festive Virtual Toast with Greek PM Mitsotakis’, available at: https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_greece210520, 21 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

³ Watch the online public discussion: ‘Greece and Israel: Reflecting on 30 Years of Full Diplomatic Relations’, available at: <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/events/>, 21 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

⁴ George N. Tzogopoulos, ‘Why Is Israel's Image Improving in Greece?’ available at: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-greece-image/>, BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 625, 24 October 2017 (accessed May 2020).

⁵ George N. Tzogopoulos, ‘Whither Greece-Israel Relations’, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/whither-greece-israel-relations-542126>, 9 February 2018 (accessed May 2020).

⁶ For a comprehensive account of Greek-Israeli relations see: Aristotle Tziampiris, *The Emergence of Israeli-Greek Cooperation* (Springer, 2015).

⁷ ‘Oren Liebermann and Elise Labott’, ‘Israel, Turkey Strike Deal to Normalize Ties’, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/26/middleeast/israel-turkey-relations/index.html>, 27 June 2016 (accessed May 2020).

⁸ Vahap Munyar, ‘Turkey and Israel Need Each Other, Says President Erdogan’, available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-and-israel-need-each-other-says-president-erdogan-93319>, 2 January 2016 (accessed May 2020).

⁹ ‘In Escalation of Diplomatic Tit-for-Tat, Turkey Expels Israel's Istanbul Consul’, available at: <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/174805-180516-in-further-escalation-of-diplomatic-rift-turkey-expels-israel-s-istanbul-consul>, 16 May 2018 (accessed May 2020).

for Hamas¹⁰ are among them. Also, the decision of President Trump to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem fueled disagreements.¹¹ But a 2018 RAND report correctly concluded that the two countries still shared strong common interests.¹² According to the 2019 Israeli Foreign Policy Index by the Mitvim Institute, 53 percent of Israelis believe that their country should try to improve relations with Turkey, compared to 32 percent who disagree.¹³

The current phase sees Israel and Turkey making new steps in rewarming bilateral ties. Roey Gilad, Chargé d'Affaires in the Embassy of Israel in Turkey, wrote an article in *Halimiz* e-magazine suggesting that the two countries could cooperate in Syria as well as in the fight against COVID-19.¹⁴ The resumption of El Al cargo flights to Turkey is a symbolic indication of the improvement of bilateral relations.¹⁵ Although the decision of Turkey to include Israel in the destinations of medical equipment cannot pass unnoticed, it is the Syrian landscape which deserves particular attention.¹⁶ According to *Jerusalem Post* defense correspondent Anna Ahronheim, 'Israel learned from Hezbollah's defeat at the hands of Turkey'.¹⁷ The main lesson learned for Israeli Defense Forces is that Hezbollah's Radwan unit found it difficult to stand up to a conventional army.

Both Israeli and Turkish media have reported heavy losses by Hezbollah's militias in the Syrian city of Idlib as a result of Ankara's military operations.¹⁸ The question is whether Turkish-Iranian relations can be affected on the medium and long-term. Should Turkey endorse the position of Israel about the role of Iran in Syria because of the pain it suffered in Idlib, a window of opportunity for closer bilateral synergies will open. But President Erdogan will need to take the US and Israeli concerns about Iran into account, without seriously damaging relations Turkish-Iranian relations and undermining Moscow's geopolitical aspirations in the region. At the writing, the Astana process – led by Turkey, Russia and Iran – does not seem to have been affected. The seventh relative summit took place via teleconference on 22 April. The parties expressed their satisfaction for the de-escalation of tensions in Idlib.¹⁹ On May 22, Erdogan and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani spoke on the phone and pledged to cooperate,

¹⁰ Raf Sanchez, 'Exclusive: Hamas Plots Attacks on Israel from Turkey as Erdogan Turns Blind Eye', available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/12/17/hamas-plots-attacks-israel-turkey-erdogan-turns-blind-eye/>, 17 December 2019 (available May 2020).

¹¹ 'Erdogan Says Turkey Aims to Open Embassy in East Jerusalem', available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-turkey/erdogan-says-turkey-aims-to-open-embassy-in-east-jerusalem-idUSKBN1EB0H7>, 17 December 2017 (accessed May 2020).

¹² Shira Efron, 'The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations', available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2445.html, RAND Research Report, 2018 (accessed May 2020).

¹³ Menekse Tokyay, 'Israeli Public Opinion Warms toward Turkey, Shows Survey', available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1583176/middle-east>, 13 November 2019 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁴ Roey Gilad, 'Turkey-Israel Common Interests between Idlib and COVID-19', available at: <https://www.halimiz.com/en/turkey-israel-common-interests-between-idlib-and-covid-19/>, 21 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁵ 'Israel's El Al Resumes Cargo Flights to Turkey after Decade-long Pause', available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/israels-el-al-resumes-cargo-flights-to-turkey-after-decade-long-pause>, 26 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁶ 'Turkey Sends Aid to nearly 30 Countries in Fight against COVID-19', available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-sends-aid-to-nearly-30-countries-in-fight-against-covid-19-35290>, 10 April 2020 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁷ Anna Ahronheim, 'Israel Learned from Hezbollah's Defeat at the Hands of Turkey', available at: <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/israel-learned-from-hezbollahs-defeat-at-the-hands-of-turkey-628836>, 21 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁸ See for example: 'Sena Guler, 'Syria: Turkish Operations Spook Hezbollah Militias', available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syria-turkish-operations-spook-hezbollah-militias/1749773>, 29 February 2020 (accessed May 2020).

¹⁹ 'Astana Guarantors Turkey, Russia, Iran Discuss Latest Situation in Syria amid COVID-19 Crisis', available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/astana-guarantors-turkey-russia-iran-discuss-latest-situation-in-syria-amid-covid-19-crisis>, 22 April 2020 (accessed May 2020).

“The new Israeli coalition government allows the Prime Minister Netanyahu to proceed to annexation irrespective of the position of the leader of Blue and White party and new Minister of Defense Benny Gantz. If this happens, his personal relationship with President Erdogan will perhaps be further damaged”

A page has been turned in Greek-Israeli relations and there’s no going back.”

including on reopening borders.²⁰

Of course, while Israel and Turkey are exploring new ways of collaboration, previous problems remain unsolved. Erdogan, for instance, has vowed to protect Palestinians against Israeli annexation.²¹ For his part, Netanyahu has said that his country will not miss a ‘historic opportunity’ to extend its sovereignty to parts of the West Bank.²² The new Israeli coalition government allows the Prime Minister to proceed to annexation irrespective of the position of the leader of Blue and White party and new Minister of Defense Benny Gantz.²³ If this happens, the personal relationship between Netanyahu and Erdogan will perhaps be further damaged. Gantz’s general position on Turkey is equivocal but it remains to be seen when he will acquire the upper hand in Israeli politics.

Dynamics in the Mediterranean are being sculpted and largely depend on the role of great powers – principally the US and Russia – and the future of conflicts in Libya and Syria. Amid uncertainty, Israel and Turkey endeavor to bridge differences. The most likely scenario is that the two countries will find a modus vivendi by agreeing on some issues and disagreeing on others. Greece is closely monitoring developments and seeks a better diplomatic presence in the Basin. That is why it has appointed Ambassador Tasia Athanasiou as special envoy for Syria²⁴ to complement work already conducted by the Embassy in Lebanon. Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias is planning a series of visits to the area.²⁵

Complicated as it is, the political environment in the Mediterranean requires careful acrobatics from regional players. Irrespective of some necessary adjustments, Greek foreign policy will remain committed to strengthening bilateral ties with Israel and the empowerment of the trilateral scheme with Cyprus. Even to think in 2020 that the Greek-Israeli partnership will be somehow affected by the course of the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement – which is nothing new – rather reflects a weakness to understand the depth of this partnership and realistic foreign policy calculations that go far beyond Turkey but can also include it. As B’nai-B’rith CEO Daniel Mariaschin said on the occasion of the establishment of the Israel-Hellenic Forum in November 2019 that the author co-convened, ‘we have turned a page in Greek-Israeli relations and there’s no going back’.²⁶

²⁰ ‘Iran, Turkey Presidents Call for Reopening Air, Land Borders’, available at: <https://en.irna.ir/news/83799323/Iran-Turkey-presidents-call-for-reopening-air-land-borders>, 24 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²¹ ‘Turkey’s Erdogan Vows to Protect Palestinians against Israel Annexation’, available at: <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/Bkiy5bFsU>, 25 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²² Jeffrey Heller, ‘Israel’s Netanyahu Says He Won’t miss West Bank Annexation Opportunity’, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians/israels-netanyahu-says-he-wont-miss-west-bank-annexation-opportunity-idUSKBN231110>, 25 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²³ Tovah Lazaroff, ‘Annexation as Early as July 1 under Netanyahu-Gantz Deal’ <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/annexation-as-early-as-july-1-under-netanyahu-gantz-deal-625304>, 9 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Announcement on the Appointment of a Special Envoy for Syria, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-announcement-on-the-appointment-of-special-envoy-for-syria.html>, 5 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²⁵ Vassilis Nedos, ‘FM Dendias: ‘Borders Do Not Change and Cannot Change’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/253060/article/ekathimerini/news/fm-dendias-borders-do-not-change-and-cannot-change>, 26 May 2020 (accessed May 2020).

²⁶ Vassilis Nedos, ‘Greece, Israel Making Up for Lost Time,’ Says B’nai-B’rith CEO’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/246586/article/ekathimerini/comment/greece-israel-making-up-for-lost-time-says-bnai-brith-ceo>, 19 November 2019 (accessed May 2020).