



The New Greek Government: Israel has Reason for Concern

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new Greek government is unlikely to change its policy towards Israel in the near future, despite the fact that its leadership leans towards the Palestinians. The main challenge facing the government of Alexis Tsipras is finding an economic compromise with the EU in a manner which will satisfy the Greek public; a public that expects miracles from Tsipras and his team. If Tsipras succeeds, he'll be free to consider other foreign policy issues. Then, Israel may have room for concern.

Greece chose a new leader this week, the 40 year old Alexis Tsipras of the left-wing party Syriza. Tsipras lacks any government experience, but was able to form a coalition within 24 hours of the elections. Noteworthy, Tsipras refused a religious swearing-in ceremony for Prime Minister, as is customary in Greece.

Syriza received 36.3% of the vote. The Greek constitution grants a bonus of 50 Parliament seats to the victorious party, in order to create political stability. Thus, Syriza has 149 seats in Parliament, out of 300, and it needed a coalition partner to forge a majority. The day after the election the Independent Greeks, a right wing party that garnered 4.7% of the votes and 13 Parliament seats, joined Tsipras. The new government has a majority of 162 seats.

Syriza was formed several years ago by 14 small groups and political factions on the Left, and elected then 38 year old Alexis Tsipras as its president. Syriza had one goal: To put an end to the process of austerity and reforms, forced upon Greece by the Troika (the European Union, the Central European Bank and the International Monetary Fund), in return for granting it more than 300 billion Euros, to rescue the country from the worst economic crisis in its history.

The two governments in power during those years - the Socialist ("Pasok") government of George Papandreou, and later the Conservative ("New Democracy") government of Antonis Samaras - signed a memorandum with the lenders, that became a despised symbol of the suffering of the Greek people.

The Troika forced upon Greece economic steps such as improving the tax collection system, cutting salaries and pensions of public administrators, a reduction in the bloated public service and the privatization of government owned companies. Syriza, the main opposition party, fought vigorously against these demands and the Greek people decided in the recent elections to challenge the European Union (EU) by handing the government to Syriza. This might affect other European countries in economic crisis such as Spain and Portugal.

Syriza's coalition partner, the right wing party Independent Greeks, formed in 2012, is led by Panos Kammenos. He served as a former deputy minister in the New Democracy government. The Left-Right coalition is based on a common agenda to reject and challenge the imposed austerity regime.

The EU, and especially Germany, is still weighing the best response to the Greek challenge. The EU has said that Greece has to live up to all its international commitments if it is to continue receiving European assistance. However, the EU leadership must accept the fact that the Greeks decided to elect a government which demands very significant changes to the aid package and especially to the conditions attached to it.

At the same time, Tsipras does not want and cannot afford a bitter dispute with the leaders of Europe and Germany in particular, and he will probably seek a compromise. The Greeks want to remain in the EU and in the Euro zone. Nevertheless Tsipras intends to pass in the near future several bills that will reflect his pre-elections pledges.

The new government plans to raise the minimum wage, ease the terms for paying overdue debts to the tax authorities, and rehire public service employees who were let go during recent years. Tsipras also plans to establish an investigative commission to look into the circumstances surrounding the previous Greek governments' adherence to the despised Memorandum with the Troika.

As to Greece's relationship with Israel, there is ample cause for concern. Since 2010, Greek-Israeli cooperation has significantly improved during the tenure of both the Socialist and the Conservative governments of Greece. Nowadays, the two countries enjoy a close and intimate relationship in several areas including defense, with air force and navy joint maneuvers leading the way.

By contrast, Syriza has been very critical of Israel. The party is not made of one cloth, but many of its leaders are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Some party leaders were involved in organizing anti-Israeli demonstrations in Athens during Operation Protective Edge last summer, and at least one of its leaders, Thodoris Dritsas, participated in one of the flotillas to Gaza.

The defense relationship may however benefit from the appointment of Panos Kamenos as Minister of Defense, who is leader of the coalition partner "Independent Greeks." In his previous capacities Kamenos has expressed friendship towards Israel and favored close defense cooperation.

Tsipras only had one meeting with an Israeli leader, in August 2012, with then President Shimon Peres who was on an official visit to Greece. Tsipras had just been elected to Parliament and became the leader of the opposition. The meeting lasted more than an hour and was very cordial. Peres refrained from politics and discussed his vision of the role the young generation should play in today's world. Tsipras listened tentatively, insisted on speaking Greek and expressed no criticism of Israel. The two mused about their age difference of more than 50 years.

Syriza always takes pain to stress that while it is critical of Israel, it is by no means anti-Semitic, and that it is a staunch critic of the Greek neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn. Syriza leaders have regularly attended commemorative events for the Holocaust in Greece. Next week, Athens will observe the International Holocaust Day. The large scale event was postponed for several days due to the elections, and it is organized by a senior Syriza leader, Attica regional governor Rena Dourou, in cooperation with the Jewish community.

The new Greek government is unlikely to change its policy towards Israel in the near future. Its main challenge is to find a compromise with the EU in a manner which will satisfy the Greek public; a public that expects miracles from Tsipras and his team. If they succeed, they will be free to consider other foreign policy issues.

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