



Israel's Emerging Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The flourishing new relationship between Israel and her two Hellenic neighbors in the eastern Mediterranean – Greece and Cyprus – is important on its own merits. But equally important, the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alliance seeks to block Turkey's ambitions of regional hegemony, while at the same time offering Ankara a key place in the new Mediterranean political order, if and when she comes to her senses.

Two events, apparently unrelated, yet interwoven in unpredictable ways, demonstrated last month that regional dynamics in the eastern Mediterranean are at a new and possibly formative stage.

Turkey downed a Russian fighter operating in Syria, which raised fears of a broadening conflict, and placed two of the world's most headstrong leaders on what seemed like a collision course. Meanwhile, despite his roots in the country's traditionally anti-Zionist left, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras paid a short and warm visit to Israel. So did Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiades.

When visiting Israel, Tsipras went so far as to recognize that Jerusalem is, and will continue to be, "the eternal capital of the Jewish People" (while offering similar recognition to the putative Palestinian "state").

Both these visits, as well as the Russian conflict with Turkey, reflect – directly or by inference – aspects of the growing cost of Turkey's vaulting ambitions under President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu.

Whether or not the term "neo-Uthmanism" serves any explanatory purpose, there was clearly an open bid by Ankara in recent years to use the regional turmoil, the so-called "Arab Spring" (perhaps the mother of all misnomers...), as a springboard for the assertion

of Turkish leadership and even hegemony. This was shaped by the ideological imperatives of the AKP leaders and their sense of affinity and obligation towards the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, such as the Hamas regime in Gaza.

As Syria descended into civil war and disintegrated, Erdogan – who once upon a time tried to position himself as Bashar Assad's friend – turned into a stern supporter of the insurgency. Even if one doubts the claims of Turkish-Islamic State connivance now put forward by the Russians, there is reason to believe that the relevant Turkish agencies were not too choosy when offering help to Assad's various enemies (including the buying of oil and gas from rebel-held areas). Meanwhile, Turkey sustained her traditional nationalist stance towards the Cyprus question, and tensions with Greece did not abate.

The results are now very much in evidence. As has been said all too often, from Davutoglu's promise of "zero problems with the neighbors" the road led very quickly to "zero neighbors without problems."

However, the escalation of Russian-Turkish tensions need not be taken too far. Neither President Vladimir Putin nor Erdogan seem to desire war, despite the bravado and the sanctions. Some opportunities for sober dialogue are now being set up (despite Putin's refusal to meet his Turkish counterpart in Paris).

But the shooting did demonstrate just how far apart Ankara and Moscow are on the future of Syria, making it quite unlikely that the current multilateral diplomatic efforts can come to fruition. This may change only if Turkey will be isolated and ignored by the other key players (which would be a dangerous game to play) – or alternatively, if she is given other good reasons to change, and at least modify, her strategy and her priorities. Otherwise, it will continue to be very difficult to bring about even an interim reduction in the intensity of the Syrian conflict, let alone resolve it.

Neither Israel nor Greece was necessarily looking at the Turkish challenge alone when they embarked on a trajectory of intense cooperation in recent years. There are excellent reasons to improve relations, not the least of which is the hope for joint energy projects, which is scheduled to be the key item at the planned tripartite Greek-Cypriot–Israeli summit.

The two countries have helped each other at times of forest fires and natural disasters, and have drawn closer in military matters too. The Israeli government stood by Greece at her hour of need, willing to encourage Israeli investment and tourism. There is a broad scope for technological cooperation, in vital fields such as renewable energies and water conservation.

Indeed, in Athens this proved by now to be an enduring aspect of national policy, across party lines, including PASOK (social-democrats), ND (conservatives), and Syriza left-wing leaders alike. As the positive interactions of Tsipras with young Israelis during his visit

made manifest, there is also an underpinning of cultural and historical affinity to this sense of partnership. (The Israeli liberal daily newspaper *Haaretz* even dedicated the leading essay in its cultural supplement to the long-lasting love affair of Israelis from all walks of life with modern Greek music).

The long shadow of Turkish policies, however, is never too far away. Israeli awareness of the potential benefits of closer association with the Hellenic world grew exponentially after the collapse of Israeli-Turkish relations. The same could be said for the other side of the coin: For many years, Israel's image as Turkey's friend and military ally did little to endear her to Greek and Cypriot public opinion.

This changed almost overnight after the Mavi Marmara incident, which made manifest to all a breach that has been brewing for some time. At the most obvious level, this realization on both sides was reflected in the welcome extended by Cypriots and Greeks to tens and even hundreds of thousands of Israelis who were no longer willing to avail themselves to "all included" Turkish hospitality in the Mediterranean resorts such as Antalya.

There is much more to the Turkish impact, however, than likes and dislikes. Greece and Cyprus helped, after 2011, in preventing similar maritime provocations. Moreover, the need to offer an effective counter-balance to the ambitions of Ankara has come to dominate reactions, in all three countries, to events and developments in Egypt.

If reactions to the change of government in July 2013 are the litmus test of ideological affinities in the region, then Israel, Cyprus and Greece have all aligned themselves on one side in favor of the al-Sisi government, while Turkey is on the other side (still refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Mohamad Morsi's removal from power, and in 2014 conniving with Qatar to control the endgame of the Israeli confrontation with Hamas so as to wrest this important lever away from Sisi's Egypt).

Even with Syriza in power – with some of its older leaders still bearing memories and scars from military repression after the 1967 coup in Greece – the powerful realization that Sisi is the barrier left standing against a descent into Islamist hell remains a driving force in Greek regional policy.

There is a "variable geometry" Mediterranean strategy. Greece and Cyprus will be joining with Egypt on December 9 for another tripartite summit, this time in Athens. Greek and Cypriot cooperation with Israel flourishes; and once Israel resolves her internal wrangles over gas production, there will be growing prospects for energy cooperation.

None of this should be read as being designed to harm Turkey or isolate her. After all, Greece maintains a tense but workable relationship. Cyprus seems eager to move forward with the quest for a solution. And Israel largely increased commercial relations with

Turkey, and serves as a conduit for Turkish exports in the region. Thus, the new geometry should not be a tool to harm Turkey.

What the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alliance does do is seek to block Erdogan's ambitions of regional hegemony, while at the same time offering Turkey a key place in the new Mediterranean political order, if and when she comes to her senses. As the leadership in Ankara settles down for a sober assessment of recent events – and seeks to strengthen its position within NATO and with the EU – the prospects for such a transformative change may well improve.

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