

Greek Defense Minister Speaks Out Forcefully in Alliance with Israel

On February 18, 2016, the Greek Minister of Defense, Panos Kammenos, addressed an international conference at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies on “Strategic Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean.” Kammenos offered a comprehensive and very forceful articulation of Greece’s view of the region: Of the dangers of radical Islam, of the problematic behavior of Turkey, and of his country’s new alliance with Israel. It is worth reading the full speech, entitled “Greece and the Southeastern Mediterranean: A Policy for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity.”

For a summary, see [Greek defense minister slams Turkey’s ‘hegemonic ambitions’](#) in *The Jerusalem Post*, 21.2.2016.

Panos Kammenos, Greek Minister of Defense: Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great privilege for me to be amongst distinguished personalities and have the opportunity to present my Government’s views on our perspectives toward the Mediterranean.

At the outset, I would like to warmly thank the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and B’nai B’rith International, for organizing the international conference; and Professor Efraim Inbar and Bar-Ilan University for hosting this important event as well as for their kind invitation.

If one asks worldwide what kind of people are the Greeks, the most probable answer is: A maritime people. Indeed, this is true! The sea is within our DNA and our relation with the Mediterranean Sea, especially the Eastern, goes back to the Minoan Kingdom and to the Aegean civilisation around Santorini. It is through the Mediterranean Sea that Greeks have travelled “for trade and knowledge and came in touch with the peoples of the south, south-eastern and western shores of the Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, we have never approached it as a “mare nostrum”. We have rather and always seen it as our privileged highway, one of communication, cooperation, commerce, and prosperity; but also, as our privileged milieu in order to stop invaders and defend our freedom.

Today, the Mediterranean is opening to us its depths and offers us many additional possibilities to cooperate. It is interesting to notice that this is not the will of all those who live around the basin. But it is certainly the will of the three democratic states in the region, Greece, Israel and Cyprus.

It is up to these three democratic states, with the assistance of the EU and our Western allies, to make it happen by working for stability.

Greece, which is the only country in the Eastern Mediterranean to be a member of both the European Union and NATO, a country of strategic importance for the free seaborne trade and the energy flow to Europe, with a shipping industry that definitely possesses a global influence, will do its utmost to achieve this goal.

I will try first to identify the threats to stability that appear in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Then, I will present the recently undertaken efforts for bilateral and regional cooperation by Greece.

Finally, I will sketch out some of the basic outlines of our future policies.

Threats to regional stability

These threats are of state and non-state nature. Obviously the primary threat is coming from ISIS (Daesh) and its criminal and terrorist activities. It is this source of instability that relates to the second, the war in Syria, which in its turn is related to Turkey's neo-ottoman, revisionist and hegemonic ambitions. Other sources of instability I consider to be the spread of nuclear weapons, asymmetric threats and regional competition.

Daesh/Jihadism

Daesh is the primary threat to regional stability as it threatens the very essence of state organization, by proposing a different and obscure form of social structure and international behaviour. The unique Islamic jihadist philosophy of Daesh is nihilistic and missionary – refusing any other kind of truth and any kind of coexistence with anybody who is different. Its nihilism is barbaric by any ecumenical human standards: slavery of big parts of population (especially women, national, religious and other minorities), destruction of art and monuments of universal cultural heritage, export of hate, terrorism and violence against unarmed civilians.

In terms of Geography, Daesh has already reached the Mediterranean shore, by expanding its influence in Libya, and by inspiring terrorist actions in Tunisia.

Thus, besides combating this scourge in the areas under its control, policies should be adopted and actions undertaken in order to prevent its growth in Libya. Similarly, states should find ways of coordination and cooperation in order to stop Daesh-inspired groups and activities in the Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa.

War in Syria

The war in Syria takes place and evolves on the Mediterranean shore, just next to Israel and across the sea from Cyprus. First of all, let me clarify that neither this war, nor the war perpetrated by Daesh, are “clash of civilisations” types of war. They are wars resulting out of the competition of regional powers or extremist groups to which I will refer further below.

Consequently, and second, the war in Syria is not a war that has resulted out of big powers or “Zionist” involvement, as it is usually thought by the average person of the other side in the region. It is the result of competition by other regional powers – NOT Israel, Greece or Egypt – competing for political, religious and economic influence.

Undoubtedly, the war in Syria must end. The destruction and the suffering are so extended and so great that its continuation makes no sense and makes no honour to 21st century humanity. Yet, a viable solution should be found, in order to avoid solutions and influences of external factors that may harm regional and international stability. Ending this war will give the opportunity for reconstruction and for ending the greatest since WWII humanitarian crisis, which has become so heavy for neighbouring states and Europe.

In conjunction let me now turn to Turkey.

Turkey is a NATO ally to Greece. Turkey is aspiring to become an EU member to which the Republic of Cyprus already belongs. Turkey, on the other hand, for more than a decade benefited from its alliance with Israel.

Yet, its policies and behaviour towards these three democracies are far from being friendly, far from being in accordance with international law, and far from being of a stabilizing nature.

Turkey continues its non-ally behaviour towards Greece, by creating frictions and issues in the Aegean and in the South-Eastern European environment, and, lately, by deliberately pouring hundreds of thousands of refugees in the European soil.

It is still maintaining illegally an occupying force in Cyprus, hinders the progress of negotiations in the island, and tries to block the exploration and exploitation of natural resources in the Mediterranean.

You in Israel know very well how Turkey behaved in December 2012 and January 2013, when the Republic of Cyprus announced the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Aphrodite field. You also know about the behaviour towards your country, its

involvement in domestic issues and the support for anti-Israeli organisations, the fomenting of anti-Semitic feelings in Turkey, its indiscretions in areas of sensitive information and technologies, and its maximalistic demands in order to normalize relations with Israel again.

I have to underline what Prime Minister Davutoglu said to his parliamentary group on December 22:

“... I felt honoured on behalf of my nation to witness the hoisting of the Palestinian flag at the United Nations. *Inshallah* [God willing] that flag will one day be waved in Jerusalem ... Whatever is wrong for Palestine is wrong for us too.”

Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions expand, as you very well know, from Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Mediterranean southern shore. Turkey has hindered the 2003 allied operations in Iraq, and has undermined the UN embargo against Iran. Worst, it has initially allowed the formation of Daesh, by permitting the passage of extremists from all over the world going to fight for this Organization and the transfer of weapons; then, it has hospitalized jihadists, it has undermined the efforts of the West to fight Daesh, it has bombed the Kurdish forces fighting against it, and traded with them, thus strengthening them.

Moreover, after for many long years trading with Syria, training units of Syria's army and after the Erdogan family spent vacations with Assad, it has been involved in the Syrian war against the Assad regime. Last, but not least, it has tried to create an international crisis between NATO and Russia, by downing the Russian aircraft, and now it also hinders the progress of the peace talks in Geneva.

Nuclear proliferation

Greece is observing the issue of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and the Mediterranean shore with great discomfort. The agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, whether one like it or not, is for the moment a reality, and what is important is the monitoring of the agreement's full implementation.

More important is to monitor how this agreement and the medium-term perspective of a nuclear Iran are going to be perceived also by its regional competitors. In fact such a perspective gives important incentives also to Turkey to go nuclear. As you all know, Turkey has nuclear ambitions that were made public in the AKP's program, before the 2002 elections. Turkey as it is publicly known, wants to build two nuclear energy power facilities, one in Akkuyu and the other in Sinopi on dangerous seismic ground. Of course right now it is not certain how fast the construction is going to proceed, given the frictions with Russia. What is important, however, is that the ambition is there.

Regional power competition

This is another threat to regional stability. It is interesting that the regional competition is primarily between Muslim states, and is expressed in two conflicts, the one in Syria and the other in Yemen. It is characteristic that in both conflicts Turkey has sided with Saudi Arabia, while in terms of religious influence over the Muslims in Europe, Turkey is competing with Saudi Arabia.

Of course, this competition and these conflicts are often wrapped up in the paper of primarily religious competition. Yet, it may be seen that Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are competing for supremacy in the region and within the Muslim world, each one pretending being and projecting a different model of state organization, and each one promoting its own economic interests, often related with hydrocarbons and pipelines.

The competition is also expressed in the arms race between the three, with relevant weapons programs and very high defence spending. In the last ten years Saudi Arabia (first) and Turkey (second), and in some years Iran (third), is each one spending in constant prices more than Israel, to which an effective defence is an absolute condition of survival. Other, smaller Gulf States are also participating in this arms race, as is the case of Qatar, recording a very high per capita defence spending. And the questions are, where this competition with Iran is going to lead the Sunni alliance, and against who are they going to turn, once the two conflicts are over.

Cooperation

On a totally different theoretical and practical approach, Greece's close constructive and peaceful cooperation with Israel is relatively recent.

The coalition Government of Syriza and ANEL indeed continued since 2015 to expand and deepen this relationship.

On July 7, 2015, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece visited Israel and met with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

On July 19, 2015, I visited Israel and met with Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon. During this visit, the Chiefs of General Staff signed another agreement of cooperation.

Further, at the end of October-beginning of November 2015, the Hellenic Air Force, together with the US and Polish Air Forces, participated in the “Blue Flag” exercise, the largest air exercise, organized by the Israeli Air Force.

The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras came to Israel on November 25, for a two-day visit. He met with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Rivlin . One of the results of this visit was the opposition of Greece to EU guidelines, concerning the labelling of goods produced in the post-1967 areas in Israel.

A Trilateral Political Consultations meeting, at the level of Secretaries General of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, was held in Jerusalem on December 17, 2015.

On January 26 of this year, I received Minister Moshe Ya'alon in Athens.

On January 27, the second High Level Intergovernmental bilateral Conference took place in Jerusalem and

Finally, on January 28, 2016, the Trilateral Summit took place and adopted a Declaration

As you very well know Greece has made similar steps towards cooperation with Egypt, either at the bilateral or at the trilateral level, with the participation of Cyprus. One may find the main elements and areas of this cooperation in the Declaration of the Trilateral Summit of Athens of December 9, 2015,ⁱ and may conclude that the two Trilateral Declarations go at the same direction and try to respond to the common strategic challenges of our region. I should finally add that our concerns for the region took me also, last January, on the 23rd, to Amman, Jordan, where the idea of cooperation and of stability dominated our discussions.

Future

The test for any future agreements is of course the implementation of the existing ones. Their implementation is also the criterion of our credibility and determination, especially when other actors from and outside the region are not always happy with our peaceful and development oriented initiatives.

We should encourage the private sector also to engage in this implementation and reap the fruits of our efforts.

Furthermore, we have to expand our cooperation with the addition of other willing states from the Southeastern Mediterranean.

We need to work together at the international level in the direction of a peaceful settlement in Syria, to support the negotiations under the UN auspices in Geneva, with the participation of all actors in Syria.

We must continue combating terrorism of any nature and support other States that are trying to deal with the threat of Daesh and other extremist terrorist and fundamentalist Organizations in the region.

We have to support Cyprus in the negotiations in order to end the Turkish occupation, and to find a solution which is functional and viable. This means that the Turkish military forces should leave from the island, that there will no longer be guarantor Powers, and that Cyprus will be able to exploit for the benefit of all its citizens its maritime natural resources.

Finally, dialogue on the basis of international law and practices increase understanding and build trust, leading thus to solutions.

This is what we advise our friends in Iran, the Arab world and the Palestinians.

Despite its name as “Barcelona Process” and with full appreciation for the Spanish contribution, I would like to remind that the decision for a comprehensive and without exclusions Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation has been taken under EU Presidency in Corfu in 1994.

Furthermore, when we established the EU Common Security and Defence Policy in 2003, our first move was to invite our Mediterranean partners, without exclusions again, to participate in this new peace and stability effort.

All these demonstrate, beyond any reasonable doubt, that allegations portraying our defence cooperation with Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, in bilateral or multilateral schemes, as directed towards one or another of our neighbours are completely erroneous and do not do justice to our initiative, which, I repeat, is solely aiming at promoting peace, security, cooperation and regional development throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Greece, Israel and Cyprus do not aspire to create or participate in an axis of evil. We have seen and continue to see the consequences of confrontation, extremism and war.

Our aim is to create, together with all those who share the same values and principles and without exclusions, an arc of stability, cooperation and prosperity extending from the broader East Mediterranean area to the Black Sea and beyond.

Our adversaries are not states or peoples and religions, but extreme ideologies and inhuman practices which incite hatred and destruction.

Our strategic priority is to create a better place for our peoples and future generations to live in peace, security and prosperity.

An area of cooperation and progress.

Our East Mediterranean, has been a cradle of great civilizations, of religious tolerance and coexistence and it can certainly become a springboard towards a better future mainly for our youth.

We should not allow any more lost opportunities, no more lost generations.

Thank you very much for your attention.
