



## **A New, Pro-Israel Government in Athens**

**by Ambassador Arye Mekel**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The right-wing conservative New Democracy party's accession to office in Greece will not weaken the country's close ties with Israel and could even strengthen them, despite the presence in the government of a minister with an allegedly antisemitic past.

The June 30 Greek general elections brought about a dramatic change. Syriza, the radical-left party that had ruled the country for the past four years, was removed from office and replaced by the right-wing conservative New Democracy party. PM Aleksis Tsipras was replaced by Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Over the past decade, ever since their country suffered a severe economic crisis, Greeks have followed this pattern: they fall for the promises made in election campaigns, are immediately disillusioned after the elections, and replace the government a few years later. The crisis began when the Socialist PM George Papandreou was in office. After a few years he was replaced by the right-wing leader Antonis Samaras. Three years after that (in 2015), Samaras was replaced by the left-wing Tsipras, and now the right-wing Mitsotakis has taken the helm.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis (51) comes from a major Greek political dynasty. His father, Konstantinos, was also a prime minister. His sister, Dora Bakoyannis, was foreign minister and mayor of Athens, and his nephew Kostas Bakoyannis – Dora's son – is the current Athens mayor.

The election results were unequivocal: the conservatives got 39.85% of the vote and Syriza only 31.53%. Greece has a rather unusual law by which the winning party gets a bonus of 50 members of parliament (out of 300) so as to ensure governmental stability. Mitsotakis thus attained a solid majority in parliament – 158 seats to Tsipras's 86. The rest of the seats were divided among several small parties. (The minimum voting age in Greece is 17.)

Mitsotakis did not need to form a coalition and was able to move swiftly. He was sworn in as PM the day after the elections, and a day after that, he had already presented his government, which includes many of his party's senior figures and a number of technocrats.

The tasks facing the new PM are not simple. Over the past decade, the EU and the IMF have provided the Greeks with three rescue plans totaling almost 300 billion euros, but the economic crisis refuses to disappear. Unemployment remains very high and the economy is not recovering. Against this backdrop, with the elections decided, the public will now demand results. Mitsotakis has promised to lower taxes, create jobs, trim the huge public sector, and work in tandem with lenders to rehabilitate the economy. The burden of proof is now upon him.

As far as Israel is concerned, Greek-Israeli relations have been greatly upgraded since 2010 and are now at their peak despite the frequent changes of government in Athens. There is no doubt that these relations, which include significant security cooperation, will improve even more in the era of Mitsotakis, who also has a relevant family background.

It was his father who, as PM in 1990, raised ties with Israel to the ambassadorial level. The younger Mitsotakis visited Israel last year and publicly vowed to enhance relations even more if he were to be elected PM. He also met with PM Netanyahu and made similar statements. The new FM, Nikos Dendias, formerly defense minister and internal security minister, is likewise known as a great friend of Israel.

Another welcome development is that the neo-Nazi Yellow Dawn party, which had 18 members in the outgoing parliament, did not pass the minimum threshold (3%) and will be left without representation in parliament. The party is demanding a recount, but the chances of that happening are very small.

The new government does include one member with a problematic past: the minister of agricultural development and food, Makis Voridis.

When younger, Voridis was an activist in far-right student organizations in Athens and London. Subsequently he was involved in far-right parties and in 1994 established the Hellenic Front, a group that mainly acted against illegal immigrants. Later he joined LAOS and in 2007 was elected to parliament on its list. LAOS was a far-right party whose leaders included known antisemites such as Konstantinos Plevris, author of the book *The Jews – The Whole Truth*.

In 2012 Voridis was appointed minister of infrastructure and transportation, and a short time later he left LAOS and joined New Democracy, the new ruling

party. He advanced rapidly in his new party and after two years was appointed minister of health. Jewish organizations and leftists protested the appointment to no avail. Now, as mentioned, he has again been appointed a minister. Voridis denies the antisemitism claims against him and defines himself as a “national liberal.”

It can reasonably be assumed that Voridis’s presence in the government will have a negligible effect, if any, on the close and intensifying relations between Greece and Israel.

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