



PERSPECTIVES

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An Energy Silk Road in the Mediterranean

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel has made the mistake of trying to integrate into a declining Arab World. Instead, it should prioritize its integration into the emerging Mediterranean bloc consisting of Italy, Greece, and Cyprus.

One of Israel's current diplomatic strategies is to court the stable Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Doing so would unlock economic opportunities for all sides while allowing for a close counterterrorism partnership (aimed primarily at Iran and Turkey). It would also sideline the Palestinian issue, which has long been at an impasse.

The value of prioritizing the Arab states is questionable, however. Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria are consumed by internal turmoil and civil war. A once powerful Egypt now relies on international aid. So does Jordan, which is little more than a glorified refugee camp. Lebanon—once an open and promising Arab state—is today little more than a destitute Iranian colony. The Gulf States are sunk deeply in the Yemen quagmire and human rights controversies. The Qatari crisis and Doha's reluctance to militarily respond to Iranian provocations undermines the prospects for Gulf normalization.

Jerusalem has a better and more immediate alternative toward which it should orient its diplomacy—one that will cement Israel's role as the dominant military and economic power in the Mediterranean. Israel should look not south for its future but northwest.

There are significant [merits](#) to the "Axis of Antiquity" between Greece, Israel, and the Republic of Cyprus. Recently, Turkey and the Tripoli-based militia it supports (along with Qatar) [signed a deal demarcating](#) Libyan-Turkish borders at the Mediterranean that infringe on Cypriot, Greek, Egyptian, and other maritime rights, leading Athens to expel the Libyan ambassador. Meanwhile,

Italy, Bulgaria, and others have expressed interest in joining the Eastern Mediterranean Energy Initiative.

Israel should capitalize on these opportunities even as it pursues closer ties with the stable Arab countries.

China is expanding economically across the Eurasian landmass with a “New Silk Road.” Israel can create a regional version of this—an “Energy Silk Road,” if you will. Israel can develop and connect its Leviathan gas fields to Cyprus’s Aphrodite fields. A gas pipeline could run through Cyprus to Greece and through the Balkans, up to Romania, and westward to Italy. If Egypt can overcome its differences with Israel and cooperate, it could attach its Zohr gas fields to the regional pipeline as well. Doing so would lift the Egyptian, Greek, and Cypriot economies out of poverty and massively grow the Israeli economy. Given Egypt’s bad relations with Turkey and proxies in Libya, as well as its increased cooperation with Nicosia and Athens, this is not impossible—though as it is busy fighting jihadists in the Sinai, Cairo’s focus will likely remain elsewhere for the time being.

In addition to natural gas, it is also possible for Israel to develop its oil supplies in the Negev, the Golan Heights, and near Jerusalem, and connect them to an additional pipeline.

The Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria have their own healthy supply of oil. Should they achieve independence amid the unrest and international isolation of Turkey and Iran, their economy could develop through creation of their own oil pipeline, which could connect to the Israeli-Greek-Cypriot initiative. Doing so would likely require enormous military assistance—something Israel might be able to provide after it deals with its own threats along its borders. This could be of vital security importance to Jerusalem, as a Kurdish state would be another pro-Western democracy and ally capable of blocking the neo-imperial ambitions of Iran and Turkey as well as containing extremist Arab groups.

Israel, Greece, and Cyprus must change their attitudes toward the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Rather than ignoring it, they should understand that Turkish Cypriots share their wariness toward Ankara. Nicosia, Athens, and Jerusalem should invite Northern Cyprus to participate in the initiative, in a manner similar to the Nicosia Master Plan for the capital city’s shared sewer system. This would elevate the Turkish-Cypriot economy and pry Northern Cyprus further away from Ankara. It could also lead to renewed peace talks on the island and reestablish Cyprus’s historic role as a central economic hub.

Important military, economic, and diplomatic opportunities could result from the establishment of an Energy Silk Road. Given the new Libyan-Turkish provocation, it's crucial that Israel sell advanced air defense systems to Greece, Cyprus, and the Balkan countries to prevent the cash-strapped Russian and Turkish regimes from infringing on neighboring countries' turf. It could also do so in the case of Kurdish independence, and make an effort to persuade the US to sell Patriot or THAAD missile defense systems to those countries. Given that America supports the initiative but wants to withdraw from the region, this should be an easy task—one that can enrich both Washington and Jerusalem. (A joint defense mechanism of all involved countries, as well as increased Israeli naval capabilities, might be required to see this through.)

Much as the Allies of WWII penetrated Europe's "southern soft underbelly," Israel can do the same. Southeastern Europe has blocked harmful anti-Israel EU resolutions and is more inclined to support Jerusalem than to support Ramallah. Making Europe more dependent on Israeli energy exports would deepen this relationship while prying Brussels loose from its dependency on Iranian and Arab oil. That alone would weaken the EU's automatic pro-Palestinian stance.

At the same time, Israel should continue pursuing its interests with the Gulf monarchies—particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Those states are modernizing and secularizing, and they want to participate in counterterrorism and economic initiatives with the Jewish state. This could include Arab investment in the Energy Silk Road, perhaps with pipelines running from Egypt and Israel into Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE.

For the time being, however, in view of the unreliability of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, Israel would do well to explore alternatives to its north.

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