



PERSPECTIVES

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The “Democratic Bloc” of the Eastern Med Cements Its Friendship

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2020 is expected to be another year of fruitful cooperation for Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, which are working together to counter rising instability caused by Turkey. Their recent agreement to commit to the construction of the EastMed pipeline opens a new chapter in a friendship they have worked on for over a decade. They are taking steps to obtain American support for the trilateral scheme despite Washington’s concerns about its potential impact on the US’s long-term partnership with Ankara. Notably, the recent killing by the US of Quds commander Qassem Soleimani found Greece standing by its allies, the US and Israel, though that position risks undermining its relations with Iran.

In the last months of 2019, Turkey served its strategic goals in Syria by deepening its military engagement following the US decision to withdraw its troops. It also recently signed two memoranda of understanding with Libya—one on demarcating maritime zones and another on military and security cooperation—intended to strengthen its regional foothold even further.

These moves challenge the security of the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, while the Turkish government violated international law as well as the UN arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011, the political reality is that it successfully implemented its strategy. Though the risks were high, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personal chemistry with Donald Trump and modus vivendi with Vladimir Putin favored Ankara’s cause.

Israel, Cyprus, and Greece closely monitor Turkish activities. At their seventh tripartite summit, which took place on January 2, 2020, the three cemented a friendship that has lasted for over a decade by formally agreeing to construct

the EastMed pipeline. Although the project is technically difficult, it can be done, and the parties have signed their commitment to it.

Lebanon and Turkey, which are both very concerned that the pipeline will infringe their perceived sovereign rights, have not yet participated in discussions of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. The unresolved maritime dispute between Israel and Lebanon on their maritime border and the persistent impasse on the Cyprus Question do not generate much optimism about either country's participation any time soon.

Following the Athens summit, Israeli and Greek PMs Benjamin Netanyahu and Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiadis issued a statement labeling the Turkish decision to deploy troops in Libya "a dangerous threat" to regional stability. Jerusalem had already supported Athens and Nicosia in calling the Ankara-Tripoli maritime deal illegal.

Ankara is determined to aggressively protect its interests in maritime zones of the Mediterranean it believes are part of its own continental shelf and exclusive economic zone. A few weeks ago, for instance, the Turkish Navy deported an Israeli research ship from Cypriot waters. This might constitute a precedent for future actions by Turkey in areas covered by the agreement with Libya.

Israeli FM Israel Katz said his country's official position on the Turkish-Libyan maritime deal does not mean it will send "battleships to confront Turkey." Such a scenario is highly unlikely because Israel and Turkey are not officially enemies. They do have deep differences, however. According to the *Times of Israel*, the Israeli military has begun to include Turkey on its list of "challenges." Also, in mid-December 2019, *The Daily Telegraph* published an exclusive story entitled " Hamas plots attacks on Israel from Turkey." The story is based in part on transcripts of Israeli police interrogations of suspects showing that senior Hamas operatives were using Istanbul to direct operations in Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

Israel, Greece, and Cyprus are working hard to secure practical US support for the tripartite partnership, which Washington has openly welcomed since the end of 2018. The Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019, signed by Trump, enables the US to substantially boost the trilateral scheme through energy and defense cooperation initiatives.

Among other things, the Act authorizes financial assistance for an International Military Education and Training (IMET) program for Cyprus for the first time. Washington and Nicosia signed a deal on security collaboration in November 2018. (US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was scheduled to visit the island in January 2020 but had to cancel because of the Qassem Soleimani killing.)

Cyprus is valuable for the Israeli military, which uses it to complete training beyond its borders. At the beginning of last month, it hosted an international commando and IAF “Game of Thrones” exercise, with IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi visiting the exercise area.

Notwithstanding the progress made, it remains unclear how American support for the “democratic bloc” will manifest. Washington greatly values its partnership with Ankara. When Trump hosted Mitsotakis at the White House on January 7, he was reluctant to join Mitsotakis’s efforts to expose the illegal and unhelpful nature of Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Israel, Greece, and Cyprus are not discouraged by this hesitation. The more they talk to each other, the deeper their synergies become. The success of their partnership lies in their joint interests in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as in their shared values and common understanding of challenges. The three have also joined forces in the fight against antisemitism in initiatives like the Israel-Hellenic Forum, launched by B’nai B’rith International in Jerusalem last November.

The January 2020 visit of Netanyahu to Athens was fruitful but was cut short by the Soleimani killing. While that event principally touched upon the national security of Israel, it did not pass unnoticed in Greece. In his talk at the Atlantic Council on January 7, Mitsotakis presented the Greek position on the matter by saying: “We are allies with the US, so we stand by our allies.”

Notably, this position could have implications for Greek-Iranian relations. Following the publication of an article in *Hi Kathimerini* stating that Greece “will have some involvement” in the event of a US operation against Iran, the Embassy of Iran responded that that would be a “hostile act” and sent a protest demarche to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Greek FM Nikos Dendias is taking steps to reduce tensions, which are unlikely to grow into a full-blown diplomatic crisis—though that possibility cannot be entirely excluded.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on January 2, 2020.

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