



Athens and Jerusalem Have a Diplomatic Opportunity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Greece, Israel, and five other countries of the Eastern Mediterranean have established the East Med Gas Forum. Turkey is not a member and is employing its own muscular approach in the region. The US would like the Forum to be more inclusive, specifically toward Ankara. Athens and Jerusalem could launch a diplomatic initiative to explore Turkey's participation, as they have nothing to lose and much to gain from such an initiative.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Greece and Israel. In 2015, two years before his death, PM Constantinos Mitsotakis called his 1990 decision to recognize the Jewish State "[extremely rewarding](#)" and expressed the hope that the friendship between the two countries would become a key pillar of Greek foreign policy.

This is just what has occurred. Lessons from the past decade suggest that both center right and center left governments believed in Mitsotakis's vision, as they both took steps to enrich Greece's relationship with Israel. The example of SYRIZA, a party that was skeptical of the relationship while in opposition before 2015, is telling.

In 2020, another Mitsotakis, Constantinos's son Kyriakos, is Greece's premier. The legacy of his father is a good omen for the elevation of the Greek-Israeli collaboration to new heights. But Kyriakos Mitsotakis is faced with difficult foreign policy challenges. For the first time since 1996, tensions between Greece and Turkey are strained to an alarming extent. This is the product of energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean that have served as a reason for confrontation rather than a catalyst for reconciliation. These tensions are additional to existing Greek-Turkish problems in the Aegean.

A military incident could well occur if Turkey continues to drill in maritime zones that it considers part of its continental shelf. The new energy landscape of the COVID-19 era has not stopped its ambitions. Greece, which regards Turkish claims as illegal because they deprive its islands of their continental shelf, will need to act to prevent the violation of its sovereign rights.

The exclusion of Turkey from the East Med Gas Forum, in which Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority participate, complicates matters. Ankara is [frustrated](#) and considers the formation unrealistic, an assessment with which Washington does not wholly disagree. US Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt [said](#), in a public discussion in Athens on February 18, 2020, that “the more inclusive the conversation is, the better it will be from the perspective of the US.” He then added explicitly that the US supports inviting Turkey to participate in the East Med Gas Forum.

Greece and Israel, along with their other partners in the Forum, will have to formulate a clear policy in this regard. While the two countries and several others condemned the November 2019 maritime agreement between Ankara and Tripoli, President Donald Trump was rather distant about it. When Mitsotakis visited him at the White House in January, [he was not publicly critical vis-à-vis Turkey](#), and the diplomatic language of the State Department has been very careful.

Turkey accuses members of the East Med Gas Forum [of rejecting its calls for dialogue](#). But when seven countries decide to proceed in a venture together, the conditions of dialogue with another party need to be set by the majority. The Cyprus Question is certainly a thorn. President of Cyprus Nikos Anastasiades has said that Turkey [sought to create grey zones in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus](#). For its part, the Turkish-Cypriot side [is not enthusiastic](#) about his proposal for a 30% share from an energy fund to be possibly established in the future.

The current reality is that Turkish research drilling is occurring without interruption in Cypriot waters during a period when Washington is not taking sides. The EU remains unable to play a political role in the region and is attempting to accommodate the diplomatic pressure of Athens and Nicosia with its continued economic cooperation with Ankara. If Turkish vessels find natural gas in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus, which has not yet happened, the crisis will enter a new phase, with unknown consequences.

Thirty years after the establishment of full diplomatic relations, Greece and Israel could lead a delicate initiative that would serve their own interests as well as those of their partners in the Eastern Mediterranean: a discussion of terms by which the East Med Gas Forum could become more inclusive, with

the possibility of a multilateral dialogue with Turkey. Such diplomatic creativity by Athens and Jerusalem would highlight not only their leading role in the region but also their commitment to finding practical solutions during a time when energy prices are very low due to COVID-19.

A diplomatic initiative of this kind would be a sign of strength, not weakness. Ankara would face a dilemma: either enter negotiations or continue its policies in the Basin. If it opts for the former, it would have to make concessions. If it opts for the latter, it would be portrayed as undermining the process. The rejection by Ankara of a multilateral dialogue initiated by Athens and Jerusalem and supported by the majority of stakeholders would certainly be criticized, including by Washington. This would probably not be in the interest of President Erdoğan, who is doing dangerous acrobatics between NATO and Russia, pursuing military entanglements in foreign countries, and facing domestic economic stresses in the COVID-19 era.

Greece and Israel have made a lot of progress in their cooperation. Regular trilateral meetings, with the participation of Cyprus, have cemented their friendship. It is now time for new themes to enter the agenda. In the final analysis, Athens and Jerusalem have nothing to lose. Along with the other countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, they are charting a safe way forward irrespective of Ankara's choices.

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