



PERSPECTIVES

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Greece Can Learn Valuable Lessons from Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For years, Greek politicians approached Israel in the hope of receiving active support against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. While current Turkish actions in the Basin expose this hope as wishful thinking, they also offer an opportunity for Greece to better understand Israel and frame the bilateral partnership (often trilateral, with the participation of Cyprus) accordingly. Instead of cultivating illusions, Athens needs to clarify what it expects from Jerusalem and be engaged in a sincere dialogue about all issues of joint interest. This is particularly the case in view of the advent of a new American administration.

The last four months have been edifying for the Greek-Israeli partnership. The lack of a military alliance between the two countries (and Cyprus) has been evident during the ongoing crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean and shows the limitations of the parties' promising cooperation scheme. Greek policymakers belonging to both SYRIZA and the now governing New Democracy party grounded their foreign policy toward Israel in the illusion that Jerusalem would support Athens or that the Greek-Israeli partnership would itself act as a shield against Turkish ambitions in the region, but the Israeli government has never expressed any interest in becoming actively involved in Greek-Turkish spats. It does, however, show its diplomatic solidarity with Greece as much as it can.

Greece does not read Israel correctly. While Israel is sometimes portrayed in Greek public discourse as a model to be replicated, it is unclear just what that might entail. Greece is not faced with problems like those with which Israel contends; nor is it under constant threat from states and non-state actors that are working for its destruction. Israel possesses a completely different strategic and military culture that can neither be applied in Greece nor

accepted by the public. Even the increase of military service from nine to 12 months was a difficult decision for Greek politicians.

There is no doubt that Turkey is threatening Greece and will continue to do so as long as Greece continues to expose Turkish bullying in its talks with the US and the EU. The situation has been exacerbated by the explorations of the Turkish vessel Oruc Reis, which has conducted research in maritime zones that have not yet been delimited. Without justifying Turkish behavior, this (cynically) means that sooner or later, bilateral negotiations on this matter will have to start. Israel and Lebanon, for example, have engaged in dialogues to sort out their maritime border dispute despite other serious problems.

The highly unsettling element in the Eastern Mediterranean is that the conflicts go beyond maritime zone disputes. After the election of Ersin Tatar in Northern Cyprus, Ankara began to [pursue a new agenda for the creation of two states on the island](#). These dynamics have not yet been sufficiently evaluated by Western analysts who insist on the need for a bizonal, bicomunal federation under a UN umbrella.

So where are we now? Greece, Israel, and Cyprus are intensifying their high-level contacts. On October 27, 2020, [a trilateral meeting](#) of Foreign Ministers Dendias, Ashkenazi, and Christodoulides took place in the Greek capital. Ashkenazi commended regional cooperation as a "[central strategic component for ensuring peace, stability, and economic prosperity](#)." A trilateral meeting also took place in Nicosia on November 13 between Defense Ministers Panagiotopoulos, Gantz, and Petrides. Gantz said [the three had agreed to promote large-scale industry cooperation](#) that will bolster defense capabilities and create thousands of jobs for all three economies.

It will be beneficial for Greece in particular to build on its cooperation with Israel, but to approach it from a realistic perspective after a long period of relying on wishful thinking. The prospect of the Biden presidency is viewed quite differently by the two partners. While Athens is narrowly looking at its implications for Greek-Turkish relations, Israel is broadly assessing potential changes for the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East landscape.

Athens needs to understand that the foreign policy of the new American administration will not be shaped by Greek-Turkish relations. Those relations will likely be placed in a basket of critical issues among which Israel will be prominent. In an [interview with the Jerusalem Post](#) in 2018, Biden's likely secretary of defense Michèle Flournoy slammed President Trump for abandoning Syria to Bashar Assad's regime and Iran. On the same wavelength, former national security adviser to President Obama Susan Rice considered Trump's decision to pull American troops from Syria

“bats**crazy.” A reconsideration of American strategy in Syria in coordination with Israel, Russia, and Turkey will have ramifications for the whole region.

Moreover, Joe Biden’s designated Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, who endorsed the Trump administration’s push for the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan to open formal diplomatic relations with Israel, does not ignore the Israel-Palestinian issue. On the contrary: he [believes in a two-state solution](#). VP-elect Kamala Harris, for her part, [has promised to restore aid to Palestinians and renew ties](#). Vowing to protect the Palestinians, Turkey’s President Erdoğan might arguably find an opportunity to enhance his country’s regional role. Blinken himself said in a Hudson debate last July that a Biden administration would work to [“find a way to have a more productive and positive relationship with Turkey.”](#)

Though Greece does not interfere with Israel’s strategic thinking, it can consult with it on whether an engagement (under agreed conditions) or an exclusion of Turkey would better serve their joint interests under a Biden presidency. They could subsequently coordinate their actions not only in the immediate neighborhood but also in the US. This diplomacy does not necessarily have to be conducted under a media spotlight. Greece and Israel (and Cyprus) can further advance their friendship and deepen their strategic relationship. Needless to say, new initiatives such as [the organization of economic conferences with the participation of the UAE and Bahrain](#) as well as [the COVID-19 Management Group](#) only facilitate the process of creating all-around synergies.

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