



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Legacy of Ambassador Arye Mekel

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,083, June 29, 2021

Ambassador Arye Mekel, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, served as Israel's envoy to Greece from 2010 to 2014. He was also deputy Israeli ambassador to the UN, diplomatic advisor to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, consul general in New York and Atlanta, and spokesman and deputy director general of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Mekel passed away on June 20, 2021 following a battle with cancer at the age of 75. He will be greatly missed by all of us at the BESA Center.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ambassador Arye Mekel played a vital role as a catalyst for the improvement of Greek-Israeli relations from 2010 until 2014. At a time when the two countries still did not know each other very well, he was instrumental in facilitating dialogue and brought the relationship to unprecedented heights. He believed passionately in this ambitious goal and patiently worked toward its realization. His contribution to Greek-Israeli friendship, which continues to deepen, will not be forgotten.

Greece and Israel are experiencing a new high in their bilateral partnership. In April 2021, they [signed an agreement](#) for the creation of an international flight center in Kalamata, a city located in the southern Peloponnese. Israel's Elbit Systems was selected to establish and operate this center. The 20-year contract [will amount to approximately \\$1.68 billion](#).

The nations' multifaceted bilateral cooperation is continuously expanding to cover new sectors. In May 2021, for instance, two Greek hospitals [began clinical trials of an Israeli coronavirus drug](#). A February meeting between PMs Benjamin Netanyahu and Kyriakos Mitsotakis [laid the groundwork](#) for these trials.

The Greek-Israeli friendship has proven resilient irrespective of political circumstances for a period of over a decade. The Greek governments of George Papandreou, Antonis Samaras and Evangelos Venizelos, Alexis Tsipras, and currently Kyriakos Mitsotakis have all been keen on expanding ties with the Jewish state since 2010. Now it is the turn of the new Israeli government led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid to follow Netanyahu's path, a highly anticipated development.

The observation that the warm, almost euphoric ties between Greece and Israel are likely to continue in the medium- to long-term is now a commonplace. This continuity is perhaps the clearest indication of the solid foundations of the bilateral partnership.

The road toward such a desirable outcome was not always easy to navigate. Nothing could be taken for granted 11 years ago when Netanyahu and Papandreou broke the ice in the hope of taking an ambitious leap forward.

The work of the then PMs was assisted by bright and hard-working diplomats. Arye Mekel, who served as Israel's Ambassador to Greece from 2010 until 2014, was a characteristic case. Diplomats do not craft policy. Their role is to implement policies and employ their own professionalism and passion in the service of that implementation. "[A wandering Jew](#)," as the *Jerusalem Post* portrayed him, Ambassador Mekel will be remembered as a great and skillful man who served Israel well, and who was a sincere friend to Greece.

Ambassador Mekel's task in Greece was daunting. Preparatory work for high-level political meetings was both important and complex, as the countries' overtures toward one another were to an extent a response to the deterioration of the Israeli-Turkish relationship. In July 2010, following his appointment as ambassador, Mekel accompanied Papandreou on his historic visit to Jerusalem; and in September of that year, only a few weeks after Netanyahu's reciprocal visit to Athens, he officially took up his position in the Greek capital.

During Ambassador Mekel's term, FM Avidgor Liberman came to Greece in October 2010, January 2011, and March 2014. President Karolos Papoulias traveled to Israel in July 2011, and in October 2013, PM Samaras and Deputy PM Venizelos [led a large Greek delegation to the country](#). Ambassador Mekel [recalled in a 2014 interview](#) that approximately 40 high-level visits took place in Greece and Israel from 2010 until 2014. As he noted, Israel had not seen a Greek official following the 1990 visit of Constantinos Mitsotakis and his then FM Antonis Samaras.

Greek-Israeli defense collaboration took on new dimensions during Ambassador Mekel's years in Athens. [In a December 2011 interview](#), he asserted, while refraining from revealing details, that joint air force exercises had already been conducted. Some weeks later, in January 2012, DM Ehud Barak [came to Greece](#), and Israel appointed a military attaché to its Embassy for the first time.

Ambassador Mekel was aware of Greece's bailout obligations and the necessity to carry out privatizations, and meticulously explored opportunities for Israeli companies. While this is an ongoing process, it started during his term, and the results are now evident. In March 2021, an Israeli consortium composed of SK Group, Naska Industries, and Plasan Sasa [became the major stakeholder in the Hellenic Vehicle Industry \(ELVO\)](#). Many other cooperation examples can be given, with the energy sector enjoying the lion's share.

In another 2014 interview, Ambassador Mekel called his stay in Greece "[the best period of his life](#)." It will definitely be remembered, with both gratitude and admiration. Ambassador Mekel's ethos and zeal were a beacon. A veteran journalist, his charisma when talking to the media was crucial to improving Israel's image in Greece. His passion in fighting antisemitism, despite the political rise of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, made all Greek governments much more sensitive and careful about the subject.

Ambassador Mekel placed great value on the Greek-Israeli friendship because he had a deep respect for the history of both peoples. He will be long remembered for his great contribution to the evolution of that friendship.

Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA Research Associate and Lecturer at the European Institute of Nice and the Democritus University of Thrace.