



What's Next for Israel and Greece?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel and Greece are steadily cementing their partnership. On 31 January 2023, Nikos Dendias became the first Minister of Foreign Affairs of a member state of the European Union to visit Jerusalem since the formation of the new Israeli government. Greece could be a valuable partner for Israel at the European level as long as multidimensional Israeli-European conversations progress. Greek-Israeli economic and defense cooperation is expanding in tandem, while new opportunities for synergies are emerging. The Israeli paradigm offers important lessons for Greece in its attempt to revise its national security doctrine, settle maritime differences with Turkey, and safeguard its defense.

The victory of Benjamin Netanyahu in the November 2022 Israeli legislative election brought the architect of the Israeli-Greek friendship back to the head of government. As prime minister in 2010, Netanyahu was the first to advocate for the making of this friendship. He subsequently initiated a process that is demonstrating a high degree of resilience despite changing geopolitical conditions and political developments.

Since 2010, Greek governments of different political ideologies, from center right to center left to left, have valued Israel as a crucial partner and envisaged closer ties with the Jewish State. For its part, the Bennett-Lapid government, though short-lived, also worked to move the bilateral partnership forward in 2021 and 2022.

Current Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis congratulated Netanyahu on his election victory last November and expressed his readiness to continue [“the very strong relations” between the two countries](#). In this spirit, Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias visited Israel on 31 January 2023 and met not only with his counterpart Eli Cohen but also with Premier Netanyahu. More importantly, he became the first European foreign minister to do so since the formation of

the new Israeli government. The [press release](#) of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs made reference to this being the first such visit.

Greece could be pivotal in maintaining positive momentum in relations between Israel and the European Union. Dendias's Jerusalem visit took place only a few days after Israeli President [Isaac Herzog met with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in Brussels](#). The importance of Israel for Europe is rising in view of the war in Ukraine. In its attempt to reduce its energy dependency on Russia, [the EU signed a memorandum of understanding with Israel \(and Egypt\)](#) in June 2022 to secure stable imports of natural gas. Israeli-European conversations are multifaceted and cover themes as wide-ranging as trade, agriculture, research and development, tourism, the fight against anti-Semitism, education programs, and more.

With that said, Israel-EU relations are sometimes marked by disagreement. Jerusalem tends to differ from Brussels on, for example, the way Iran's moves should be interpreted. In [an article published in Politico](#), President Herzog welcomed the vote in the European Parliament to blacklist Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization and commended von der Leyen for backing these calls.

In his meeting with Dendias, Cohen stressed the importance of declaring Iran's Revolutionary Guards a terrorist organization in Europe. We are not there yet as far as such as designation is concerned. Still, Greece -- a country under threat from Turkey -- can certainly understand the security sensitivities of Israel, its reliable partner in the Eastern Mediterranean. Its voice at the European level will matter.

In the bilateral sphere, Israeli-Greek economic relations are flourishing. [According to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics](#), Israeli exports to Greece climbed from \$442.6 million in 2019 to \$670.3 million in 2022, while imports from Greece increased from \$321.2 million in 2019 to \$587 million in 2022. Investment opportunities are also rising. Israel [is a top investor in Greek tourism and real estate](#). At the end of January 2023, Tikkun Europe, a subsidiary of the Israel-based Tikkun Olam, [inaugurated a medicinal cannabis processing plant in the Greek region of Corinth](#).

Defense collaboration is also progressing. Defense ministers hold regular meetings, the most recent of which [took place in Jerusalem in November 2022](#). Arms deals are also on the agenda. In the summer of 2022, [Forbes reported](#) that Greece had deployed Israeli systems to counter Turkish drones. The country is also [reportedly interested in buying Israeli SPIKE/NLOS missiles](#).

In strategic parlance, [as long as Greece is striving to revise its national security doctrine](#), it can learn valuable lessons from Israel, principally in the fields of cybersecurity, hybrid threats, and space. Cooperation also goes well beyond defense. In the summer of 2022, Athens and Jerusalem [signed a memorandum of understanding to work together on civil protection](#).

The current phase of bilateral relations finds Israel having restored diplomatic ties with Turkey. Although trust between Jerusalem and Ankara has yet to be fully regained, this new reality has generated concern in Greece. Athens will need to carefully study the security needs of Jerusalem and chart an autonomous course in their dynamic partnership.

[In a recent interview](#) with the Greek newspaper *To Vima*, Israeli Ambassador to Greece Noam Katz made reference to the maritime agreement between Israel and Lebanon and its potential impact on other arrangements in the Eastern Mediterranean. It will certainly be in the interests of Greece to examine this accord in detail and explore its practical implementation, if any.

Timing is crucial. Greece is looking to settle its maritime differences with Turkey while responding to threats from its neighbor and safeguarding its security. The Israeli experience could be edifying.

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