

# **ISRAEL AND GREECE: A DYNAMIC ALLIANCE IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

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The tightening relations between Israel and Greece have been changing the geopolitical status quo of existing balance of power in Mediterranean Sea creating a regional powerful alliance on the fields of politics and defence. The official visit of Defence Minister of Israel Ehud Barak to Athens confirmed the dynamic of military agreement that had been recently signed by two states.

The historic shift in Turkey's regional policies and its claim to regain its Ottoman legacy in the Muslim Middle East threaten the Israeli national security.<sup>1</sup> Another important reason is the energy and the need of Israel to export gas in Europe. The gas reserves of Economy Exclusive Zone (EEZ) of Cyprus in eastern Mediterranean bordering on Israel's EEZ where important gas deposits have been discovered.

## **Israel's interests in Mediterranean**

Israel is looking for new allies in Mediterranean and it is increasingly turning to Greece, a full member-state of European Union and NATO.

Amikam Nachmani, a distinguished Israeli scholar and Professor of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University pointed out that "the Turkish-Israeli relations are a different story but they connect with the Greek-Israeli relations, without a doubt. Relations between Israel and Turkey are in an entirely new phase, and I predict that they can't return to their previous point. This is a new situation. This is the first time that the two countries, Turkey and Israel, using language of ' Middle East ' as the leaders of countries of the Middle East, not the language of modesty. We tried for a long period to avoid this outcome, but in the end it has created an entirely new situation. In no way, things will not be as it was in the past."<sup>2</sup>

The Islamist prime minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan have strongly criticised policies of Israel and he has emerged as a leading anti- semitism figure of Muslim

world. Erdogan adopted a hostile policy toward Israel due to Operation Cast Lead in 2008- 2009 against Gaza and the accident of Mavi Marmara ship. Ankara has been trying to exploit the changes of “Arab Spring” promoting its moderate Islamic model and reinforcing its relations with emerging Islamic powers.

The energy is another significant element and it offers an avenue of cooperation among Israel, Greece and Cyprus. The newly discovered offshore gas reserves in Israel means that it could find itself in more advantageous position in the coming decade reducing the dependence on foreign energy and hostility and boycotts by biggest energy powers.<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem realises Greece as a European hub that gives Israel a unique opportunity to channel and sold gas to European market.<sup>4</sup> Moreover Israel needs similarly Cyprus to export gas to Europe. Israeli and Cypriot gas could be transported by pipeline to a liquefaction plant that could be built in southern Cyprus.<sup>5</sup>

The defence agreement between Greece and Israel is equally vital and it contributes to the security and stability of Mediterranean Sea. Greece’s distance from Israel helps the Israeli Air Forces (IAF) to train the pilots against simulated Iranian targets.<sup>6</sup>

### **Greece needs a powerful ally**

The alliance between Greece and Israel, a regional power, serves Greek national interest. On the field of energy the discovered gas deposits in Cyprus EEZ enhances the possibility for Athens to declare a Greek EEZ ignoring the threats of Ankara that invokes casus belli. Greece is going to exploit its oil and gas reserves and it has invited investors to bid for exploration in three blocks that estimated to hold 250 million barrels of oil. The area south of island Crete assessed to hold enormous gas deposit and the fact that American firm Noble Energy has discovered huge amount of gas in Cyprus EEZ is increasing the Greek hopes for offshore gas reserves.<sup>7</sup> Noble Energy is currently exploring for natural gas some 100 nautical miles south east of Cyprus and adjacent to Israeli giant Leviathan and Tamar basins.<sup>8</sup>

The debt – stricken Greece should strengthen the relationship with Israel because Athens: a) it acquires a powerful ally who is respectable by the global centres of power, b) it can benefit from Israel if it will invest on Greek economy. Israel is place of high concentration of high tech firms and he has more listed companies of the NASDAQ than any other country besides the USA,<sup>9</sup> c) the intensifying contact between Greek Americans and American Jews could promote common strategies.

## Conclusion

The relationship between Israel and Greece changes the existing status quo of Mediterranean, and preparing the ground for a powerful trilateral alliance among Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Politics, defense and energy are creating avenues for close cooperation for the aforementioned countries. On the one hand, Israel needs Greece to acquire access to the European Union and on the other hand Athens is based on Jerusalem to promote its national interest in Aegean Sea. ***Athens should adopt a realistic foreign policy examining the developments in Middle East after the “Arab Spring” and observing the role of Turkey on the post-revolution realities.***

The cooperation in monitoring terrorists and illegal activities in eastern Mediterranean is considered another common interest between Jerusalem and Athens.<sup>10</sup> According to Dr. John Nomikos “Israel can increase dialogue and investments in infrastructure, especially military as well as collaborates closely with the Greek intelligence community – means identifying strategic interests, especially mutual interests, and then turning it into practical strategic direction. Greece and Israel has a mutual interest to eradicate Turkish roots/influence, combat Islamic caliphate growing in Balkans”.<sup>11</sup>

***Athens must declare as soon possible an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – including the Greek tiny island Megisti/ Kastelorizo- ignoring the Turkish threats.*** The governments of Athens have adopted for years a passive attitude towards Ankara abandoning the Greek legal rights in Aegean Sea. The military agreement with Israel gives to Athens an opportunity to pursue an active foreign policy against Turkey while Ankara continues to turn to the Muslim world promoting its moderate Islamic model.

### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> M.K Bhadrakumar, “Israel turns table on Turkey”, Asian Times, 27 August 2011, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MH27Ak05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MH27Ak05.html)

<sup>2</sup> George Protopapas, Interview with Professor Amikam Nachmani, journal Strategist, Issue 13 , January 22, 2011, in Greek weekly newspaper “Investor’s World”.

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Bronner “Gas Field Confirmed off Coast of Israel”, The New York Times, 30 December 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/31/world/middleeast/31leviathan.html>

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Puder “Analysis Greece and Israel: Reluctant Allies”,Front Page Magazine , 12 December 2011, <http://frontpagemag.com/2011/12/12/greece-and-israel-reluctant-allies/>

<sup>5</sup> Stayros Lygeros, “On the field of Eastern Mediterranean”, Greek Newspaper Kathimerini 31 December 2011, [http://www.kathimerini.gr/4Dcgi/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_kathpolitics\\_1\\_31/12/2011\\_1297221](http://www.kathimerini.gr/4Dcgi/4dcgi/_w_articles_kathpolitics_1_31/12/2011_1297221)

<sup>6</sup> See op.cit., Joseph Puder.

<sup>7</sup> Kostis Geropoulos, “Greece speed up oil and gas exploration”, New Europe, 4 January 2012, <http://www.neurope.eu/article/greece-speeds-oil-and-gas-exploration>

<sup>8</sup> Cyprus Defence minister to discuss natural gas security with Israel, Financial Mirror, 7 January 2012, <http://www.financialmirror.com/news-details.php?nid=25412>

<sup>9</sup> See op.cit.,Joseph Puder.

<sup>10</sup> See ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Greek-Israeli security relations: An overview”, RIEAS 7 January 2012,RIEAS participated in a workshop on Greek-Israeli Security Relations in Tel-Aviv University on 24 November 2011, <http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/editorial/1670-greek-israeli-security-relations-an-overview.html>