

## Evaluating the Prospects of Greek-Israeli Military Cooperation

Vassilis Kappis

*Can we expect the demise of Greek-Israeli relations when (and if) Israel and Turkey restore bilateral relations? This article suggests that while the Greek-Israeli partnership may have been accelerated by the tension between Ankara and Jerusalem since 2008, the ties between Greece and Israel are determined not only by common interests, but also by positive perceptions of each other's nature and role in the Eastern Mediterranean. A rift between the two countries is thus unlikely in the near future, as partnerships bolstered by ideational factors tend to be bestowed with a sense of goodwill that ensures long-term cooperation, even amidst temporary setbacks.*

For more than six decades, relations between Athens and Jerusalem were detached, if not downright hostile. Greece's long held support of the Palestinian Liberation led Israel view the posture of its Mediterranean neighbour with apprehension.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, however, this ambivalent status was overturned, starting with the exchange of high-level visits between the two capitals. In the following months, bilateral relations improved markedly, giving rise to the notion of an Israeli-Greek-Cypriot geopolitical axis, when Cyprus joined the nascent security partnership.<sup>2</sup> Cooperation gradually flourished, with bilateral and trilateral agreements concluded and enacted at a steady pace. For Israeli and Greek commentators, this evolving relationship reflected a power balancing logic, as it coincided with the rapid deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations.<sup>3</sup>

Historically a close friend of the Arab world, Greece surprised analysts with this

---

*Dr Vassilis Kappis, PhD Sydney University, is a visiting researcher at Tel-Aviv University in Israel and can be contacted at [v.kappis@outlook.com](mailto:v.kappis@outlook.com). The author gratefully acknowledges financial support in connection with this publication from the Israel Institute in Washington DC.*

<sup>1</sup> Abadi, J. (2000), "Constraints and Adjustments in Greece's Policy toward Israel," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, (11:4), pp. 40-70.

<sup>2</sup> Klokkaris, P. (2015), "Cyprus-Greece-Israel: Strategic Relations," *Eastern Mediterranean Geopolitical Review*, (1:1), pp. 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Inbar, E. (2014), "Israel's Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Middle East Quarterly*, (21:4), pp. 1-12; Karagiannis, E. (2016), "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Alliances," *Middle East Quarterly*, (23:2), pp. 1-11.

dramatic policy change, which was (and still is) largely attributed to the gradual escalation in Israeli-Turkish relations since 2008, which reached a climax with the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident.<sup>4</sup> It is only natural then, that the prospect of a “détente” between Ankara and Jerusalem generates skepticism about the future of Israeli-Greek relations.<sup>5</sup> Turkey is, after all, a major player in the Mediterranean, possessing a strong track record of cooperation with successive Israeli governments ever since Prime Ministers Menderes and Ben-Gurion upgraded relations to include joint military and intelligence undertakings.<sup>6</sup> A high point was reached in the early 1990s, when the two countries developed a strategic partnership aimed at curbing Iraqi, Iranian and, crucially, Syrian ambitions to alter the status quo in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

What can we expect, then, of Greek-Israeli relations? The answer is, in short, stability and progress. Observers who foresee a return to the 1990s may have overlooked the inner dynamics behind the Greek and Cypriot attitude shift towards Israel. While power balances and common security interests remain crucial in explaining patterns of cooperation in international relations, elite perceptions play an important role in determining its scope and resilience. In this manner, objective conditions and intersubjective perceptions of reality may bolster each other’s effect. This is because cooperation based solely on notions of power and/or interests is vulnerable to exogenous shocks such as power shifts,<sup>8</sup> in addition to endogenous concerns such as the fear of entrapment,<sup>9</sup> whereas partnerships bolstered by shared beliefs may turn out to be particularly durable.

There are firm theoretical grounds in support of this argument. Variables pertaining to the values, motives or preferences of policy makers<sup>10</sup> and concepts such as “belief systems”, “images” and “perceptions” have been incorporated in various analytical frameworks, aimed at explaining state behaviour.<sup>11</sup> The decision to cooperate could thus also be viewed through a perceptual prism. In international politics, rational states tend to balance (ally) against (potentially) threatening actors.<sup>12</sup> Widely accepted measurements of

---

<sup>4</sup> Mekel, A., “A new geopolitical bloc is born: Israel, Greece and Cyprus,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 21/2/2016, at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/A-new-geopolitical-bloc-is-born-Israel-Greece-and-Cyprus-445645>, [accessed 3/6/2016]; Tziampiris, A. (2014), *The Emergence of Israeli-Greek Cooperation*, New York: Springer International Publishing, pp. 64-101.

<sup>5</sup> Stern, M., “Might Turkish-Israeli rapprochement be premature?,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 13/1/2016, at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Might-Turkish-Israeli-rapprochement-be-premature-441433>, [accessed 3/6/2016].

<sup>6</sup> Schonmann, N. (2013), “Back-Door Diplomacy: The Mistress Syndrome in Israel’s Relations with Turkey, 1957-60,” in C. Jones and T. Petersen (eds.), *Israel’s Clandestine Diplomacies*, London: Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, pp. 85-101.

<sup>7</sup> Tziampiris, *The Emergence of Israeli-Greek Cooperation*, pp. 64-75.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, G. (1997), *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Snyder, G. (1984) “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics*, (36:4), pp. 461-495.

<sup>10</sup> Allison, G. (1999), *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York: Longman; Hermann, C. (1972), (ed.), *International Crises*, New York: Free Press; Janis, I. and L. Mann (1977), *Decision Making*, New York: Free Press; Lebow, R. (1981), *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press; Holsti, O. (1972), *Crisis, Escalation, War*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

<sup>11</sup> De Rivera, J. (1968), *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*, Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill; Snyder, R. et al. (eds.) (1962), *Foreign Policy Decision-making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, Glencoe: Free Press.

<sup>12</sup> Walt, S. (1987), *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Sabrosky, A. (1980), “Interstate Alliances: Their Reliability and the Expansion of War,” in D. Singer (ed.), *The Correlates of War*, New York: Free Press, pp. 161-198; Kegley, C. and G. Raymond (1990), *When Trust Breaks Down: Alliance Norms and World Politics*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

power and hostile intentions have been shown to matter in threat calculations, but the subjective attributes of threat variables open the door to additional, perceptual factors. The existence of shared values and common elements of identity could thereby infuse a sense of trust and the desire to cooperate under conditions of uncertainty. Liberal scholars have long argued, for instance, that democracies tend to form alliances.<sup>13</sup> Ideational factors, therefore, may play a decisive role when assessing the origins and prospects of partnerships between sovereign states.

Favorable elite perceptions in Greece could, at least in part, explain the onset and persistence of Greek-Israeli cooperation under tense political and security conditions. The Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, while incomplete, has been underway for quite some time, aided by the strong commercial ties between the two countries and the mediating efforts of the Obama administration.<sup>14</sup> The Israeli-Greek relationship, however, appears to be impervious to these developments, as showcased by the recent “status of forces” accord, a comprehensive agreement on hosting Israeli military personnel in Greek territory.<sup>15</sup> Previously, the United States had been the sole other beneficiary of a similar -in scope-agreement, rendered essential due to the presence of NATO bases in Greece. Joint military maneuvers, meanwhile, have reached a notable regularity and sophistication, with Greek and Israeli air assets undertaking complex exercise scenarios throughout an operational theatre extending from the Israeli Negev desert to the Greek mountainous range of Olympus.<sup>16</sup>

The rapport between the Greek and Israeli Armed Forces is not only contingent on the professionalism and effectiveness of the Israel Defence Force (IDF).<sup>17</sup> The Greek appreciation also stems from the substantial commonalities regarding the operational challenges faced by the two institutions. Both numerically inferior and geographically disadvantaged when compared to their rivals, the IDF and the Greek Armed Forces chose to focus on force multipliers such as the training of their special forces and the introduction of technologically superior weaponry.<sup>18</sup> As a result, despite the erosion of Greek deterrence due to impact of the country’s financial crisis, the two armies are not dissimilar in their operational philosophy, emphasizing rapid response capabilities and air superiority in their doctrines, clearly manifested in recurrent joint exercises.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gartzke, E. and A. Weisiger (2013), “Fading Friendships: Alliances, Affinities and the Activation of International Identities,” *British Journal of Political Science*, (43:1), pp. 25-52.

<sup>14</sup> Arbell, D., “Back together? Why Turkey-Israel relations may be thawing,” Brookings Institute, 14/12/2015, at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/12/14-turkey-israel-thawing-relations-arbell>, [accessed 20/4/2016].

<sup>15</sup> “From now on Greek and Israeli soldiers will be allowed to station either in Greece or Israel to participate in military training exercises,” New Europe website, 22/7/2015, at <https://neurope.eu/article/greece-and-israel-boost-military-co-operation>, [accessed 20/4/2016].

<sup>16</sup> “Here are some stunning photos of Israeli Air Force’s largest ever international exercise,” The Aviationist website, at <http://theaviationist.com/2015/10/30/blue-flag-2015-exercise-photos/>, [accessed 17/4/2016]; “Top of the Olympus,” IAF Magazine, at <http://www.iaf.org.il/5642-37864-en/IAF.aspx>, [accessed 18/4/2016].

<sup>17</sup> “Greek Breeze,” The IAF Magazine, at <http://www.iaf.org.il/5642-35913-en/IAF.aspx/>, [accessed 19/4/2016] “Hellenic Army Deployed to Israel,” Defence – Aerospace website, at <http://www.defense-aerospace.com/articles-view/release/3/167167/greek-and-israeli-apaches-train-together-in-negev.html>, [accessed 15/4/2016].

<sup>18</sup> Swift, R., “Israel’s special forces operate outside of the box,” *The Jewish Journal*, 27/07/2015, at [http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/israels\\_special\\_forces\\_operate\\_outside\\_of\\_the\\_box](http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/israels_special_forces_operate_outside_of_the_box), [accessed 1/4/2016]; Tsilikas, S. (2001), *Greek Military Strategy: The Doctrine of Deterrence and its implications on Greek-Turkish Relations*, Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, at [www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA397555](http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA397555), [accessed 13/1/2016].

It comes as no surprise, then, to see Greek members of the defence establishment praise the merits of their Israeli counterparts. This “chemistry” between the two forces, moreover, is unlikely to wane. In the coming years, Israel will place an increasing emphasis on conventional and asymmetrical challenges related to its offshore hydrocarbon reserves. The potential for security cooperation in this area is substantial, with the Greek Navy possessing a long tradition of relevant capabilities and resources, including a dedicated international training center located in the island of Crete.<sup>19</sup> Israel, meanwhile, has developed an extensive array of defence solutions that are particularly tailored to Greek (and Cypriot) security requirements. The Greek Air Force already makes use of Israeli-developed munitions for its F16 fleet.<sup>20</sup> In the future, the Greek Armed Forces could benefit from Israeli advancements in mid-range SAM systems (David’s Sling) and coastal patrol boats (the Sa’ar range of vessels), both of which appear suitable to the operational requirements of the Greek air defence “umbrella” and the Coast Guard, respectively.

What is somewhat surprising, however, in Greek-Israeli relations, is the bipartisan support of the bilateral partnership in the Greek political establishment, a novel phenomenon in Greek politics. While the leftist government in Athens, elected in 2015, featured a number of influential anti-Israeli figures (including an openly pro-Palestinian Prime Minister), cooperation between the two nations remained surprisingly consistent, often challenging the commitments of crisis-ridden Greece to the foreign policy postulates of the European Union, as the recent EU battle over the labeling of Israeli settlement products indicates.<sup>21</sup> This is a major turn of events, as Prime Minister Tsipras’s SYRIZA party clearly opposed military cooperation with Israel in its governmental program.<sup>22</sup>

Without a doubt, the aforementioned stance is an important indicator of a perceptual adjustment among Greek policy-planners. This is partly related to the wider security environment across Europe. The advent of radical Islamist terrorism has rendered a number of governments across the continent, irrespective of ideological affiliation, less sensitive to Arab demands and more receptive of the Israeli approach in security affairs.<sup>23</sup> The Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks still reverberate through the political echelons of EU capitals, where the once predominant narrative emphasizing tolerance and multiculturalism becomes increasingly unconvincing. In short, the European “soft power” model is losing its attractiveness. In Athens, the ongoing financial and migration crises are leading the country’s political and intellectual elites to question the European orientation of

---

<sup>19</sup> NATO designation is NMIOTC - NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre – Hellas.

<sup>20</sup> Eshel, T., “The High Cost of Precision Attack,” Defence Update website, 6/5/2011, at [http://defense-update.com/20110506\\_precision\\_attack.html](http://defense-update.com/20110506_precision_attack.html), [accessed 20/4/2016].

<sup>21</sup> “Greece becomes latest EU state to reject Israel labelling policy,” Israel National News website, 12/6/2015, at [www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/204468#.VxCaXqh96M8](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/204468#.VxCaXqh96M8), [accessed 20/4/2016].

<sup>22</sup> See node 38 of the SYRIZA party 2014 governmental program at <http://links.org.au/node/2888>, [accessed 21/4/2016].

<sup>23</sup> See for example “Statement by the Spokesperson on the latest attacks in Tel Aviv, Petah Tikvah and Jerusalem,” European Union External Action Service, Brussels, 9/3/2016; “Israeli tech can help EU fight terror, Peres tells French PM,” Times of Israel website, 25/3/2016, at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-tech-can-help-eu-fight-terror-peres-tells-french-pm>, [accessed 4/4/2016]; “PM Netanyahu speaks with EU High Representative Mogherini,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Release, 12/2/2016, at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-speaks-with-EU-High-Representative-Mogherini-12-February-2016.aspx>, [accessed 3/6/2016]; “HN: EU must learn from USA, Israel in fighting terrorism,” Prague Daily Monitor website, 24/3/2016, at <http://praguemonitor.com/2016/03/24/hn-eu-must-learn-usa-israel-fighting-terrorism>, [accessed 12/4/2016].

the contemporary Greek identity.<sup>24</sup> Europe's reluctance to share the burden of the irregular migration flows added insult to injury for Greece, whose very participation in the European Communities rested on the premise of increased security for the country's borders.

It is no coincidence, then, that a negative perception of Euro-Atlantic institutions is ever more reflected in the country's foreign policy. Greek strategists seem to acknowledge (or perhaps fall back to) the idea of a historical nation with a distinct culture that finds itself increasingly vulnerable and isolated from the rest of the world. This self-image enables Greeks to closely identify with a long-held perception of Israel among Jews.<sup>25</sup> We can reasonably expect this trend to continue in the future. Greece is already forced to cater for multiple, conventional and asymmetrical, security challenges without disrupting its economic recovery and the nation's policy planners are more than likely to identify with the Israeli experience in this area.

Even in the purely financial domain, Israel's "startup" culture has gained considerable credit among Greek stakeholders, who promote this model as a potential answer to the country's economic woes.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the two nations' emerging identity as bastions of stability and democracy in a volatile region should reinforce perceptions of mutual affinity, particularly at a time when authoritarianism and radicalism engulf large parts of the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>27</sup> These beliefs could be shared by larger segments of the Greek and Israeli societies, as elite perceptions have been shown to not only affect international politics,<sup>28</sup> but also to possess the capacity to spread across societies, thereby forming long-lasting security communities.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Couloumbis, T. "Where does Greece belong?," (in Greek), *Kathimerini Daily*, 25/12/2015, at [www.kathimerini.gr/843667/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/poy-anhkei-h-ellada](http://www.kathimerini.gr/843667/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/poy-anhkei-h-ellada), [accessed 15/4/2016]; "Does Greece belong to the West?," *European Business Review*, 7/4/2016, at [www.europeanbusiness.gr/page.asp?pid=2107](http://www.europeanbusiness.gr/page.asp?pid=2107), [accessed 14/4/2016].

<sup>25</sup> Kokkolis, G. "Greeks and Jews: Two "brotherless" brothers," (in Greek), iefimerida news website, at <http://www.iefimerida.gr/blog-content/29039/ελληνες-και-εβραιοι-δύο-«ανάδελφα-αδέλφια»/>, [accessed 22/4/2016].

<sup>26</sup> "The Invest in Greece organization with numerous Greek businessmen in Israel," (in Greek), Enterprise Greece organization, 9/10/2013, at <http://www.enterprisegreece.gov.gr/gr/o-organismos/vibliothkh/nea/to-invest-in-greece-me-polyplhthh-apostolh-ellhnon-epixeirhmaton-sto-israhl?pg=5>, [accessed 21/4/2016].

<sup>27</sup> Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement after the trilateral meeting between Israel, Greece and Cyprus, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28/1/2016, at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/Trilateral-meeting-between-Israel-Greece-and-Cyprus-28-Jan-2016.aspx>, [accessed 3/6/2016].

<sup>28</sup> Amir, Y. (1969), "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations," *Psychological Bulletin*, (71:5), pp. 319-342.

<sup>29</sup> See Adler, E. and M. Barnett (eds.) (1998), *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.