

Jerusalem issue brief



Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs
Institute for Contemporary Affairs
Founded jointly with the Wechsler Family Foundation



Vol. 16, No. 20

December 18, 2016

Greece-Israel-Cyprus Relations: Ripe for Expansion?

Dr. George Voskopoulos



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, center and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras shake hands during a meeting at the presidential palace in the Cypriot capital, January 28, 2016. (Yiannis Kourtoglou, Pool Photo via AP)

- Relations with Greece and Cyprus provide Israel with allied neighbors and bring Israel closer to Europe in terms of security, trade, and energy.
- Israel, Greece, and Cyprus are the only working democracies in a region of undemocratic, semi-democratic, and failing states. This is a powerful motivating factor for cooperation.
- Israeli-Greek relations have advanced to a degree where the militaries' air forces and navies are conducting joint operations and joint maneuvers.

- Israel expressed deep gratitude to both countries for sending fire-fighting aircraft when widespread fires hit Israel in November 2016.
- Greece, Israel, and Cyprus have decided to formalize their proposal for the construction of a pipeline from gas fields off the coast of Israel. The three democratic countries can guarantee in the long-term a secure means of delivery in an effort to minimize Europe's dependence on Russian gas.

Inter-state relations consist of rational choices aimed at producing desired outcomes. For Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, this means a continuation of stability and security in the chaos that has erupted from the Arab Spring. In light of this upheaval in the Middle East, cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel is essential to produce a haven of stability.

First, for Israel, Greece and Cyprus represent a bridge of stability to Europe, a stable region close to home. This security dimension is important for a country surrounded by pockets of instability and sources of radicalism. Both countries provide Israel with an allied neighbor and bring Israel closer to Europe in terms of security, trade, and energy.

Second, Israel is also a crucial security actor in a region affected by drastic domestic changes within states lacking a culture of peaceful co-existence. Currently, Greece is heavily saddled by the influx of refugees fleeing war. Cyprus, Greece, and Israel share similar significant interests such as security, energy security, and the need to deal with radicalism and terrorism.



Israeli (left) and Greek helicopters flying in Greece on joint maneuvers in 2014 (*Israel Air Force*)

These three countries have a lot to gain by deepening multilevel cooperation.

Third, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus are the only working democracies in a region of undemocratic, semi-democratic, and failing states. This is a powerful motivation factor for cooperation since democratic values are a fundamental criterion for partnerships. This strategic partnership could set the groundwork for future cooperation among these states.

In the last few years, Greek-Israeli relations have intensified due to the intensity of threats, the urgency, and the need to solidify relations in a region tormented by multifaceted threats. Israeli-Greek relations have advanced to a degree where the militaries are conducting joint air force operations and joint maneuvers by Greek and Israeli navies. Greece permitted an overfly mission by Israeli military aircraft in Greek air space in 2014. An Israeli military attaché has been stationed in Athens since 2014. These are major choices on the part of Athens, whose foreign policy of the past had focused exclusively on building a one-way relationship with the Arab world, leaving Israel out of the picture.

Israel expressed deep gratitude to both countries for sending fire-fighting aircraft when widespread fires hit Israel in November 2016.



Participants in a joint Israel-Cyprus-Greek fire-fighting exercise held in Cyprus in April 2016.
(*Israel Fire and Rescue*)

A Stable Axis of Power

Greece-Cyprus-Israel relations are setting clear ground rules of engagement for states to operate as regional stabilizers. Jerusalem, Athens, and Nicosia constitute a stable axis of power that should be expanded to fill the vacuum of leadership in the region. The tripartite cooperation between the three countries as well as the joint declarations that followed recent meetings were labeled “non-exclusive,” thus leaving the door open for others willing to participate. Yet, any potential candidates for joining this cooperation will have to be clear about its intentions, policy choices, and above all their support for peace and democracy. These trilateral understandings are a message to the region. Israel, Greece, and Cyprus are initiating an alliance of stable nations, who share common values, and are willing to fight (in different ways) terrorism.

The recent advances constitute just the security dimension of this new tripartite cooperation. Cyprus and Greece provide Israel with close proximity to Europe, a continent where, despite problems, democracy flourishes. The intensity of threats, as well as the deteriorating security in the Middle East, point to the need of further cooperation between the stable forces in the region. This is a historic moment for the future of this region and the time is ripe to produce more allied relationships amidst the chaos of the Middle East.

In a very promising development, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus have decided to formalize their proposal for the construction of a pipeline from gas fields off the coast of Israel. They are taking their case to the EU Climate Action and Energy Commissioner, thus making a formal step in materializing the project. The feasibility report of the proposal and its financial competitiveness are encouraging. The project possesses strategic advantages since it uses the safest route to Europe. The three democratic countries can guarantee in the long-term a secure means of delivery in the effort to minimize Europe’s dependence on Russian gas.

* * *

George Voskopoulos, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of European Studies at the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece, and the former head of the department.

**This Jerusalem Issue Brief is available online at:
<http://www.jcpa.org>**

Alan Baker, ICA Director; Lenny Ben-David, Managing Editor. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (Registered Amuta), 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-561-9281, Fax. 972-2-561-9112, Email: jcpa@netvision.net.il. In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 7 Church Lane, Suite 9, Baltimore, MD 21208; Tel. 410-653-7779; Fax 410-653-8889. Website: www.jcpa.org. © Copyright. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Fellows of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

**The Institute for Contemporary Affairs (ICA) is dedicated
to providing a forum for Israeli policy discussion and debate.**

To subscribe to the Jerusalem Issue Brief list, please go to link:
<http://www.list-jcpa.org/brief-sub.html>

To unsubscribe from the Jerusalem Issue Brief list, go to link:
<http://www.list-jcpa.org/mail-brief/forms/optoutform.asp>
