



L-r: President Nicos Anastasiades of Cyprus, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Alexis Tsipras, then-Prime Minister of Greece, in Beer Sheva, December 20, 2018. Photo: GPO/Kobi Gideon

Israel's Policy in its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus

Orna Mizrahi

The Israel-Greece-Cyprus triangular framework constitutes a new element in Israeli foreign policy, and since the framework was inaugurated in January 2016, cooperation between the three countries has expanded. The initiative in creating the triangle came from Greece and Cyprus, but Israeli policymakers were quick to spot the opportunity and boost the tripartite framework with content and activity. The approach by the Israeli establishment is a positive example of inter-organizational cooperation, especially between the National Security Council (NSC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which jointly advanced the matter with the cooperation of all the government ministries to form an overall integrated policy with their counterparts in Greece and Cyprus. The triangle is capable of changing the regional architecture in a way that contributes to Israel's national strength if the partners succeed in expanding cooperation between them, adding more countries to the new bloc, and jointly addressing the main challenge from Turkey, which regards the bloc as a threat to its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: foreign policy, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean, regional cooperation, energy

Background: The Failure of Previous Efforts to Form a Regional Framework

Since its establishment, Israel's aspiration to develop relations with neighboring countries from its second circle has been a key element in its national security strategy, given Israel's hostile relations with its closest Arab neighbors. This approach, which was adopted by Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was called the "periphery doctrine." At that time, Israel hoped for a secret alliance between Israel and the large Islamic powers: Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. In a confidential letter (July 1958) to United States President Dwight Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion wrote, "We have begun to strengthen our ties with four neighboring countries in the external circle of the Middle East: Iran, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Turkey."¹ Over the years, Israel managed to develop bilateral, if not permanent, relations with some of these countries, and the dream of a regional alliance faded.

Another opportunity to advance regional cooperation emerged years later, this time in the near circle, following the interim agreements with the Palestinians (1993-1995) and the peace agreement with Jordan (1994). Israel regarded relations with the surrounding Arab countries as a key element in its regional strategy, and subsequent progress in the process of recognition of Israel by part of the Arab world planted hope for expanded regional cooperation and the creation of a "new Middle East," grounded primarily in the Israel-Palestinian-Egypt-Jordan quadrangle. During these years, the possibility of a regional alliance was explored. These hopes, however, were dashed very quickly by the familiar disputes: the absence of a solution to the Palestinian issue and a lack of desire for internal reasons on the part of the regimes in Egypt and Jordan to upgrade their political and economic relations with Israel, given the deep hostility in large parts of the population of these countries to Israel and the opposition to normalization,

which was regarded as a negative development that should be condemned. Also contributing to difficulties in developing Israel's relations with its neighbors were the existing differences between Israel's cohesion, military power, and economic and technological achievements as a Western democracy and the inherent problems in these states.

During these years, Israel was also partner to the attempt by the European Union to establish a broad framework for cooperation aimed at reinforcing stability and economic development in the region. In 1995, the European Union launched an initiative for a partnership between Europe and the Mediterranean countries. The partners in this initiative, known as [the Barcelona Process](#), included the European Union countries and 12 parties from the Mediterranean region (Israel, Turkey, Cyprus, Malta, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and the Palestinian Authority as an observer). This framework led to a bilateral dialogue between Israel and the European Union and some of the participants, as well as multilateral meetings, but the attempt to promote joint activity failed. The efforts to rejuvenate this process and institute other frameworks for cooperation continued over the years, and a new follow-up framework to the Barcelona Process that includes 43 countries, [the Union for the Mediterranean](#) (UFM), was formed in Paris in 2008 and continued ever since. Its aim is to advance cooperation for the sake of stability and security in the region, but its achievements to date have been very limited.

The Israeli Turn to the Eastern Mediterranean

Starting in 2010, following the improvement in bilateral relations with Greece and Cyprus, the idea arose of forming a new framework in the Eastern Mediterranean area. The idea gained momentum following the discoveries of natural gas in the region.

Tripartite cooperation with Greece and Cyprus was not originally an Israeli initiative,

although the idea was raised frequently by diplomats in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The tripartite framework is a format initiated by Greece and Cyprus with additional countries in the area (Egypt and Jordan). A propitious opportunity came when Israel adopted a proactive foreign policy for developing new relations in the regional and international theaters. Israel's interests, particularly following the deterioration in relations with Turkey, dovetailed with the

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searches by leaders of Greece and Cyprus for partners in the southeastern Mediterranean area. The two countries recognized Israel's ability to contribute to Greece, which suffered from internal distress, and Cyprus, which sought closeness to Israel following the discoveries of gas at sea and because of the Turkish threat.

Israel's policymakers identified the opportunity to formalize a tripartite framework, and professional staff in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Council (NSC) promoted the idea and pushed for its implementation. At the same time, Prime Minister Netanyahu adopted the proposal, which suited his approach that Israel should strive to develop its political, economic, and security relations, especially in new near and remote theaters (Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America). This came at a time when Israel was experiencing difficulties in developing its standing and ties in the regional and international systems, especially in the European Union, primarily because of lack of progress toward a resolution of the Palestinian issue. The westward turn and the creation of a new cooperation framework on Israel's doorstep

fit in well with the overall foreign policy that was designed at the time.

The decision to formalize the triangle with Greece and Cyprus led to a systemic effort, led by the NSC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to establish a new framework. The idea was to devise a format for meetings and areas of cooperation. All of Israel's government ministries lent a hand, and an intensive dialogue was conducted with their counterparts in Athens and Nicosia. At the same time, it was agreed that biannual summit meetings would be held, in which trilateral and bilateral meetings of ministers would take place to discuss a broad range of topics: defense (in peacetime and in an emergency), internal security, energy, economics, trade, tourism, environment, culture, health, and education. Over the past two years, the tripartite framework has been upgraded further, following a decision to include the United States in its activity as a party providing support and assistance.

Toward the Establishment of a Tripartite Framework with Greece and Cyprus

The rapid progress in developing cooperation between the three countries was possible because of their shared values as liberal democracies in the Eastern Mediterranean area. Another factor was the commitment of the three leaders who became strategic partners: Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Cypriot President Anastasiades, and Greek Prime Minister Tsipras, replaced in July 2019 by newly elected Prime Minister Mitsotakis, another enthusiastic supporter of Israel. At the same time, from Israel's standpoint, the timing of the consolidation of the framework was no coincidence, and was due primarily to the following developments:

- a. The discovery of gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin was an important motive for cooperation, especially with Cyprus, given its common maritime border with Israel. In 2010, the two countries signed

an agreement delimiting the maritime border, and the need for cooperation grew with the discovery of the Aphrodite gas field, most of which is within Cypriot economic waters but spills over into Israel's jurisdiction. The discovery of the natural gas fields created an opportunity and a need for cooperation in the production and export of the gas reserves, and in security for the gas facilities and shipping in the Mediterranean Sea.

- b. The upheaval in the Middle East over the past decade, which exposed the weaknesses and instability of the proximate regional order, also contributed to Israel's westward turn. At the same time, the threat mounted from Iran, which as the leader of the Shiite axis took advantage of the civil war in Syria to approach the border with Israel, therefore generating a more concrete threat to Israel from Lebanon and Syria than in the past. The regional upheaval also created an opportunity to develop Israel's relations with the pragmatic Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, but it was clear that the Palestinian question still constituted a barrier to any substantial progress on this track. In this situation, Israel had to seek out new spheres to the west in the Eastern Mediterranean for more natural partners. Greece and Cyprus also shared concern about the impact of events in the Middle East (the wave of immigration that swept Europe via Greece, and the rise of the terrorist threat on the continent).
- c. The deterioration of relations between Israel and Turkey since the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Erdogan (Prime Minister starting in March 2003 and President starting in August 2014), a party with a conservative Islamic ideology. Relations deteriorated further over the past decade following the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident in 2010. Israel's efforts to preserve its relations with Turkey were of no avail, and even after Israeli apologized for the

outcome of the incident, Erdogan pursued a hostile policy toward Israel, accompanied by provocative statements. Relations with Turkey were therefore no longer a barrier to the advancement of cooperation between the triangle members.

- d. Cooperation between the triangle members is also likely to help Israel, given the difficulty of furthering its relations with the European Union in recent years. Despite Israel's good bilateral relations with most European countries, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a major stumbling block to cooperation with Israel in the formal EU frameworks. The Association Council, the framework for the annual dialogue between Israel and the EU, has not convened for a decade. Furthermore, the EU frequently discusses the Israeli-Palestinian issue and regularly criticizes Israeli policy. This difficulty in the broad European Union framework has led Israel to concentrate on bilateral relations with partners in the European theater, among them Greece and Cyprus, in part in order to improve Israel's stand in the EU framework.

The new framework creates a ring of support in dealing with threats to Israel. At the fifth summit (in December 2018), Prime Minister Netanyahu stated, "And these bonds are not merely based on shared interests and geographic proximity—they are based on shared values in a very volatile region, very violent region."

Israel's Interests in the Tripartite Framework

The tripartite cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, which has resulted in seven summits since January 2016 (the most recent in January 2020) and joint activity in many spheres, serves Israel's political, security, and economic interests.

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the fifth summit (in December 2018), Prime Minister Netanyahu [stated](#), “And these bonds are not merely based on shared interests and geographic proximity—they are based on shared values in a very volatile region, very violent region. We share deep histories and rich culture. We are all vibrant democracies. We all value pluralism, freedom, and peace. *And we are all threatened by forces of terror and religious radicalism.* Our alliance is an anchor of stability and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean (emphasis added).” In almost all of Netanyahu’s public statements in his summit meetings with the leaders of Cyprus and Greece, he also mentioned the Iranian threat, which is at the top of the Israeli agenda. These comments were welcomed by his partners. For example, in a [May 8, 2018 interview with i24 News](#) before the fourth summit, and against the background of information on Iran’s intention to establish a base in the Mediterranean, the Cypriot President said that the threat to Israel from Iran was also a threat to Cyprus.

Israel’s interest in energy cooperation is clear: ensuring continued production of the gas in Israel’s economic waters, guaranteeing Israel’s rights to some of the gas produced from the Aphrodite gas field, and finding a joint solution for exporting gas outside the region.

Two main possibilities for exporting gas are under consideration. One is transferring gas to liquefaction facilities in Egypt. The other is laying a pipeline to Europe via Cyprus and Greece, and from there to Italy. The latter, the EastMed Pipeline, is the more ambitious project; it includes construction of 1,300 kilometers of pipeline under the sea and 600 kilometers on land, at an estimated cost of \$6-7 billion. An agreement to lay the pipeline was signed at the most recent tripartite summit and plans for the project are proceeding, despite its complexity, cost, and the difficulties created by Turkey, all of which question the feasibility of the agreement. The agreement was ratified only recently by the Greek parliament. At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing fall in

oil prices [have also reduced the feasibility of energy-related projects in the region.](#)

Cooperation among the three countries in the energy sector creates possibilities for expanding it to additional countries in the region. Besides Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy, the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum \(EMGF\)](#), announced in January 2019, includes Egypt and representatives from Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. After the [opening conference of the framework](#), representatives of the member countries met again in July 2019. At the same time, a major joint project to establish a shared electrical grid connecting Israel, Cyprus, Crete, and Greece—the [EuroAsia Interconnector](#)—is progressing, and cooperative efforts in renewable energy are underway.

In the security sphere, there is extensive cooperation between the three countries. This cooperation serves Israel’s interests in a number of dimensions:

- a. One is the formulation of a joint response to naval threats against freedom of the seas and maritime commerce (most of Israel’s foreign trade, especially with Europe, goes through the Eastern Mediterranean), ports, and marine energy facilities. This cooperation, under American sponsorship, is especially important because of the expanded Russian presence in the Mediterranean; hostile measures against Israel, Cyprus, and Greece by Turkey; and the dispute between Israel and Lebanon on the maritime border between them.
- b. The second is the creation of strategic depth in a war. This consists mainly of possible use by Israel of airports and seaports in Greece and Cyprus in wartime and the placement of emergency warehouses outside the range of the long range missiles possessed by the Shiite axis.
- c. The third is joint military training and exercises, [in some cases with the participation of forces from other countries \(the US and other European states\)](#). There are joint naval exercises, and [the Israeli air](#)

force has trained in Greece for a number of years. For example, in May 2019, a large-scale joint exercise took place in Cyprus, with the participation of infantry and air forces.

- d. The fourth dimension concerns agreements between the three countries on internal security and anti-terrorism warfare, which are useful to Israel in both preventing terrorism (for example, exposing Hezbollah operatives in Cyprus) and in joint action in combating crime.

Cooperation likewise extends to aid following natural disasters. Israel was in need of help from Greece and Cyprus in combating uncontrolled fires. Greece and Cyprus helped extinguish the Carmel mountain range fire in 2010, and this cooperation was formalized and used to help extinguish additional waves of fires in 2016 and 2019. Cooperation is also underway in rescue and evacuation, with joint exercises conducted in this sphere. A joint war room for emergencies (fires, earthquakes, and floods) is on the agenda, with the aim of adding additional countries.

At the same time there are economic opportunities for Israel, for example, increasing the volume of incoming tourism from these countries (religious and medical tourism and cruises). Also notable are the possibility of increased commercial activity and the developing ties in communications, health, and the environment (agreements for preventing sea pollution and the protection of beaches, sewage management, and development of environmentally friendly technology), as well as cultural cooperation.

Another interest is the benefit from Israel's contributions to its partners in innovation and technology, including in cybersecurity. In this framework, Israel hosted the fifth summit in December 2018 in Beer Sheva, at which the Israeli National Cyber Directorate and Cyber Emergency Response Team (CERT) were launched.

As the ties grow stronger, a regional geopolitical bloc is emerging, which can aid Israel in the political arena. Greece and Cyprus

support Israel, especially in discussions about Israel in the European Union framework. Although their ability to contribute there is limited, given that EU decisions are made by consensus, they can sometimes block decisions against Israel. For example, Greece, with the support of Cyprus, headed those opposed to marking products made in Jewish communities in the West Bank.

The three countries also constitute a core for the development of Israel's cooperation with additional parties in the Mediterranean region and Europe. This has already contributed to Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan, at least in the energy sector, within the framework of the EMGF. In the future, this may also contribute to agreement between Israel and Lebanon on delimiting their maritime border and sharing the profits from gas production in the disputed gas prospects.

Israel's success in making the United States a part of the trilateral activity serves Israel's interests in obtaining the superpower's sponsorship in ensuring security in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although this involvement is also motivated by US interests (primarily against Russia), this sponsorship fortifies the strategic ties between the countries. It can likewise contribute to the materialization of some of the ambitious projects on the agenda, especially the EastMed gas pipeline, which includes United States involvement. Referring to this in the sixth tripartite summit in March 2019, which was also attended by the US Secretary of State, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Pompeo's presence showed American support for this regional effort, and signaled the vitality of the framework.

The Challenges Facing the Tripartite Framework

Turkey, under Erdogan, constitutes the main challenge to cooperation between the three countries. Turkey regards the consolidation of the Israel-Greece-Cyprus axis as a threat to its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean,

and a barrier to Erdogan's ambitions as a regional power. Turkey has poor relations with all three of the triangle's participants. It does not recognize Cyprus, and no progress has been made toward a settlement of the Turkish-Cypriot territorial dispute. There is ongoing friction between Greece and Turkey, and relations between Turkey and Israel have deteriorated since Erdogan gained power. It appears that this realization led Turkey to undertake countermeasures in the Eastern Mediterranean. As part of its efforts to thwart the three countries' joint activity, Turkey signed an [agreement](#) with the Government of National Accord in Tripoli in November 2019 to delimit the maritime border. This agreement, which was condemned by the three countries and other parties in the region, draws a line between southwestern Turkey and northeastern Libya, while ignoring the interests of Greece and Cyprus. It also poses a significant threat to the three countries' ability to proceed with the construction of the EastMed gas pipeline. Turkey has likewise staged other provocations, such as oil and gas exploration in Cypriot territorial waters and hostile land and sea actions against Greece.

The existing and future friction between Israel and Arab countries in the Eastern Mediterranean can also have a negative impact on the relations between the three countries. At issue is friction with parties on the Mediterranean coast with whom Israel has an active conflict: Lebanon, Syria, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Negative effects are likewise possible from instability in Egypt or a change in the regime that damages relations with Israel. Negative developments in the Palestinian theater are also liable to cast a shadow on the tripartite partnership (the collapse of the Palestinian Authority or Israeli measures to change the status quo, such as annexation), given the commitment of Greece and Cyprus to the official positions of the European Union on the Palestinian question. Cooperation by Greece and Cyprus with Israel is based on shared interests and values, but

these can also change as a result of internal developments in the respective countries, or following possible changes in the balance of power in the region and in Europe. Furthermore, disagreements about the pace of progress in cooperation already agreed to by the triangular partners are possible, with an emphasis on security measures and energy, as well as possible future disagreements stemming from efforts by Greece and Cyprus to achieve progress in their relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon in tandem with their tripartite relations with Israel.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The formalization of the tripartite framework constitutes an achievement for Israel's regional foreign policy. Cooperation between the three countries has made rapid progress, and since the triangle was formed in 2016, spheres of joint activity have expanded. This is actually the first time that Israel has been part of a tripartite strategic alliance, thereby substantially altering the regional architecture and enhancing Israel's national power. It can also consolidate Israel's affiliation with this region and deepen its identity as a Mediterranean country.

At the same time, it appears that the full potential in cooperation between the three countries has not yet been realized. The new government in Israel will have to take action to intensify and expand cooperation in order to realize this potential, for example by motivating these countries to join Germany in classifying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, separate from the European Union's position on this question.

The possibility of expanding the framework to include Italy and possibly other European countries should be considered, as well as the consolidation of American involvement and support, in order to promote the old idea of a broad regional alliance that will add to Israel's security and to regional stability. It is recommended to take care to avoid alienating Turkey, because in the post-Erdogan era, Turkey

is likely to again become an important partner of Israel. Care should also be taken to avoid giving Eastern Mediterranean players the impression that strategic cooperation with countries in Europe constitutes an alliance against Muslim countries, or that it comes at the expense of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors.

Lt. Col. (ret.) Orna Mizrahi joined INSS as a senior research fellow in December 2018, after a long career in the Israeli security establishment. In her most

recent position as Deputy National Security Adviser for Foreign Policy at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office, she coordinated the approach to the Israel-Greece-Cyprus triangle. In the IDF, she served as an intelligence analyst in the Military Intelligence Research Division and as a senior officer in the Strategic Planning Division.

Notes

- 1 Liel, A. (2008). *Demo Islam, Islamic democracy in Turkey*. Hebrew University of Jerusalem Press [in Hebrew].