

Exploring the Cyprus-Israel Alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean

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NICOSIA, Cyprus – Is a new alignment in the making, bringing together Israel, Cyprus, and Greece? Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman’s talks here earlier this month, following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit in February, confirmed a meeting of minds on security, energy, and mutually beneficial business deals. Israeli technology will help Cyprus build state-of-the-art desalinization plants, using power generated by gas from offshore gas fields. Cyprus and Israel are working with the same U.S. company, Noble Energy, to bring offshore gas to market. This is now more urgent for Israel, following the disruption of gas supplies from Egypt bringing the likelihood of power cuts this summer.



Some strategists claim that new gas pipelines or electricity cables linking Israel, Cyprus, and Greece would offer Europe greater energy security than existing routes through Russia or the elusive “southern corridor” through Turkey. They envisage gas or electricity from the eastern Mediterranean being transported to Europe via Crete and the Peloponnese in southern Greece.

Observers here say that Israel and Cyprus share wider interests as the only non-Muslim countries in the Middle East. In this view, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece need to cooperate to prevent instability spreading from North Africa and to counterbalance the new regional sheriff, Turkey. All three countries have their own difficulties with Ankara.

Cyprus and Israel enjoy close relations with Russia and all three countries have significant Russian minorities. Two Russian companies are expected to bid next month for licenses to explore for hydrocarbons in Cyprus’s exclusive economic zone, and Gazprom is seeking part of the action from Israel’s gas finds. Russia has given Cyprus a €2.5 billion loan to help it cope with the euro crisis. With its companies involved, Moscow would not stand in the way of the new alignment.

Yet today’s political alignments alone may not tell us much about the longer-term geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel’s recent rapprochement with Nicosia and Athens is only a partial substitute for its previous close relations with Turkey. Turkey and Israel share an interest in the restoration of stability to Syria, before sectarian strife spills over to Lebanon and Jordan. If Turkey’s efforts eventually succeed in restraining the violence in Syria, Israel will be one of the main beneficiaries. Turkey’s relations with Iran have sharply deteriorated since Ankara stepped up pressure on its Syrian ally.

Turkey's military regret the loss of Israeli military technology and the Israeli air force has not found an adequate replacement for Turkish airspace. While Turkey has won popularity in the Arab street from its rift with Israel, some emerging Islamist leaders in North Africa and the Middle East are less taken with Turkey's secular model. Despite current tensions, too much is at stake to base the supposed new alignment on a permanent split between Israel and Turkey. Israel itself may be reluctant to be drawn into Greece's simmering disputes with Turkey, or the unresolved Cyprus conflict, and does not share the Orthodox Christian affinities of Greece, Cyprus, and Russia.

Greece faces an uncertain political and economic future. There has been a surge in support for extreme left and right wing parties, ahead of parliamentary elections on May 6. It is far from certain whether the two leading mainstream parties will be in a position to form a grand coalition following the elections. A government beholden to extremist parties may be less inclined to pursue the country's new alignment with Israel.

Energy links between the eastern Mediterranean and Europe remain for the moment pipe dreams. It is more than 500 miles across deep waters from Cyprus to Crete and new links would require major investment. For the moment, the Cypriot and Israeli governments still need to determine how much gas will be available for export, and by what means, after satisfying growing domestic demand. Energy companies may well prefer the flexibility of liquefied natural gas to pipelines, enabling them to sell to the highest bidder in Europe or Asia.

Israel, Cyprus, and Greece are right to strengthen cooperation because it could reduce their vulnerability to internal and external shocks. For now, their political, military, and energy cooperation should be taken step by step, aiming to deliver concrete benefits and to bolster confidence and trust. Looking ahead, it is important to realize that this need not be a zero-sum game. Israel and Turkey may in time overcome their differences and there may well be renewed efforts in the future to resolve the problem of the division of Cyprus. The door should remain open to cooperation with other regional players, including Turkey, when political circumstances permit.

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