

The New Geopolitical Landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean: the Israeli Perception

Zenonas Tziarras
University of Nicosia

The article investigates the role of Israel in Eastern Mediterranean affairs, and particularly the dynamics of its participation in the new partnership with Cyprus and Greece, through the prism of its past and future relations with Turkey. It identifies the background context that led to current regional relations in the Eastern Mediterranean, evaluates the character and objectives of the Israeli-Cypriot-Greek (and Egyptian) partnership, and examines the prospects of this multiparty cooperation and mutual exclusiveness, under the light of future Turkish-Israeli relations.

An enquiry about Israel's geopolitical position in the region could notably be related to current Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's well-known monograph *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*;¹ what he laid out in 2001 about his vision of "Turkey's international position," is directly linked to the current affairs in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East. Among others, Davutoglu argued that Turkey's strategic relations with Israel in the mid-1990s favored Israel and alienated Turkey from its Arab neighbors;² an implication that called for "the reevaluation of [Turkey's] broader Middle East policy and its inter-regional outcomes" and the unburdening of the country from "the passive image that it presents in its relations with Israel."³

Dr Zenonas Tziarras, PhD Politics & International Studies (Warwick), MA International Relation and Strategic Studies (Birmingham), is a Political Analyst on Security and Turkey, and a Research Associate of the Diplomatic Academy at the University of Nicosia.

¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *To Stratigiko Vathos: Oi Diethnis Thesi tis Tourkias* [Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position (*Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, 2001)], trans. Nikolaos Raptopoulos (Athens: Poiotita, 2010).

² Davutoğlu, *Stratigiko Vathos*, 108, 631.

³ Davutoğlu, *Stratigiko Vathos*, 637.

In order to understand and evaluate contemporary international relations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Israel's position in particular, one needs to take into account the evolution of Turkish foreign policy since the early 2000s, including its perceived need to distance itself from Israel. This article looks at Israel's relations with the Eastern Mediterranean states, particularly Cyprus and Greece by factoring in Turkey's regional policy. The aim is threefold: firstly, to identify the historical and geopolitical background of the current Eastern Mediterranean affairs in conjunction with Turkish foreign policy; secondly, to evaluate the character and goals of the developing Israel-Cyprus-Greece (and Egypt) cooperation; thirdly, to explore the future of the new partnership and Israel's position in the light of Turkish-Israeli relations. Although geopolitical antagonism is the name of the game in the Eastern Mediterranean, regional relations should not be considered as mutually exclusive in the long run. Regardless of any changes in the geopolitical setting, Israel's regional stature has a lot to gain from sustainable ties with Cyprus and Greece and this could constitute a new era in Jerusalem's foreign policy; one of more stable regional relations.

Turkish Foreign Policy and the Eastern Mediterranean

Today's geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean are driven by three main factors: Turkey's history of bad political relations with Greece and Cyprus; the gradual deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations since 2002, and particularly after 2008; and the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Cyprus and Israel. Unquestionably, the political disputes between Turkey and Greece over the years (e.g. Greek Cypriot claim for self-determination, national minorities, delimitation of maritime areas in the Aegean, etc.) and the Cyprus Problem – particularly the 1974 Turkish invasion and occupation of the island's north – have shaped, to a great extent, the region's patterns of enmity and amity. Greece and the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), given their close political, cultural and ethnic ties, have been in diplomatic cooperation and close coordination towards their problematic relations with Turkey; the nature of this bilateral relationship has changed little overtime and is thus an important component of the current geopolitical equation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For its part, Israel had not been a traditional partner of Greece and Cyprus as the two countries have, over the years, been more closely affiliated with the Arab World. On the other hand, Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize the State of Israel; though Turkey and Israel maintained a mostly

covert relationship since 1948,⁴ they found themselves forming a strategic cooperation in 1996. Apart from the fact that the special relationship was established by the most important allies of the United States in the Middle East, two main elements led to its formation: the improvements in the Arab-Israeli peace process in the early 1990s and the mutual security threat perceptions particularly towards Syria. The promising *Oslo Accords*⁵ – signed in 1993 by then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat – alleviated, at least temporarily, the main cause of friction between Israel and Turkey.⁶ After that, and despite the fact that their geopolitical bond became official in 1996, the deepening of their relationship was almost instantaneous as they were both aware of the mutual strategic benefits. Furthermore, Syria – as a fierce Palestinian supporter, a traditional military threat to Israel, and a security threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity via its support for the militant-secessionist Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK) – became an important driving force towards the Turkish-Israeli partnership.⁷

But it did not take long for this dynamic to be reversed. In 1998 Turkey and Syria escaped a full-scale war when Damascus eventually complied with Ankara’s demands over the PKK question.⁸ Thereafter, Turkish-Syrian relations, and by extension Turkish-Iranian relations, entered a period of booming and multileveled cooperation. At the same time, in 2000, after the failure of Camp David Summit, the Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada broke out and the Arab-Israeli peace process collapsed.⁹ Therefore, by the early 2000s the two

⁴ Jacob Abadi, “Israel and Turkey: From Covert to Overt Relations,” *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 15:2 (1995), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/viewArticle/4548> [accessed 10 April 2015].

⁵ U.S Department of State, “The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process,” 2014, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo> [accessed 10 April 2015].

⁶ Alan Makovsky, “Tansu Ciller in Israel: Pursuing Turkish-Israeli Partnership,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 03 November 1994, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tansu-ciller-in-israel-pursuing-turkish-israeli-partnership> [accessed 10 April 2015].

⁷ Amikam Nachmani, “The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie,” *Middle East Quarterly* 5:2 (1998), 19-29 (19). The Greek-Syrian developing alliance was also an issue of security concern for Turkey; see, Daniel Pipes, “Syria Beyond the Peace Process,” *Policy Paper No. 40* (1996), *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 57.

⁸ Meliha Benli Altunisik and Ozlem Tur, “From Distant Neighbours to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations,” *Security Dialogue* 37:2 (2006), 217-236 (217-218).

⁹ U.S Department of State, “The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process.”

main catalysts that gave rise to and kept together the Turkey-Israel bond were no longer in place. In 2002, this geopolitical conjuncture coincided with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. Being characterized by a (Turkish) political Islamic ideology that aspired to elevate Turkey to the leadership of post-Ottoman geopolitical and geocultural existence, the AKP signified a break with the traditional, and mostly isolationist, Kemalist military-bureaucratic establishment.¹⁰ Although Turkey's relations with the region improved significantly, through increasing economic and diplomatic relations,¹¹ this strategic vision was not adopted entirely in policy-making until after 2008, when AKP managed to largely marginalize the Kemalist political and military elites.¹²

As the AKP began dominating domestic political life, its ideology became aligned with policy-making and the revisionist character of Turkish foreign policy became more evident. This change enabled the AKP to implement policies described in Davutoglu's *Strategic Depth* regarding Israel and the wider region. Turkey's reevaluation of the Turkish-Israeli partnership had both an ideological and a pragmatic basis; the latter stemmed from the fact that Turkey's dissociation from Israel would allow it to grow deeper relations with the Arab World and pursue a more independent foreign policy. After all, Arab disapproval of the Turkish-Israeli cooperation was one of the main reasons behind Davutoglu's criticism of it. This new policy was notably expressed during the 2008-2009 Gaza War, when Turkey heavily criticized Israeli methods and policies. Similarly, at the 2009 Davos World Economic Forum, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan publicly embarrassed the Israeli President Shimon Peres accusing him that "when it comes to killing, you know well how to kill."¹³ On

¹⁰ See Behlul Ozkan, "Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism," *Survival* 56:4 (2014), 119-140; Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42:6 (2006), 945-964.

¹¹ Nader Habibi and Joshua W. Walker, "What Is Driving Turkey's Reengagement with the Arab World?," *Middle East Brief* 49 (2011), Crown Centre for Middle East Studies.

¹² Michael Reynolds, "Echoes of Empire: Turkey's Crisis of Kemalism and the Search for an Alternative Foreign Policy," *Brookings Analysis Paper* 26 (2012), The Saban Center for Middle East Policy; Dariush Zahedi and Gokhan Bacik, "Kemalism is Dead, Long Live Kemalism," *Foreign Affairs*, 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66391/dariush-zahedi-and-gokhan-bacik/kemalism-is-dead-long-live-kemalism> [accessed 10 April 2015].

¹³ "Gül, Erdoğan lash out at Israel for ongoing Gaza assault," *Today's Zaman*, 17 January 2009, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_gul-erdogan-lash-out-at-israel-for-ongoing-gaza-assault_164329.html [accessed 10 April 2015]; Katrin Bennhold, "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel," *The New York Times*, 29 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html> [accessed 10 April 2015].

the following year, the *Mavi Marmara* affair – a deadly Israeli raid on the Turkish ship that was currying humanitarian aid to Gaza – undermined even more the bilateral relations between the two former partners, while in September 2011, the release of the United Nations Palmer Report on the Gaza flotilla incident, with which Turkey disagreed, further downgraded its relations with Israel.¹⁴ Thus by 2011 Israel was facing significant political problems with Turkey and became more isolated in an already hostile and unstable region, especially after the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings.¹⁵

In the meantime, Israel in the late 2000s discovered significant natural gas reserves in the *Tamar* and *Leviathan* fields; apart from the regional security issues and the declined relations with Turkey, hydrocarbons became another important issue that called for the reconfiguration of Israel's regional relations. At that moment, Cyprus – which launched its own hydrocarbons exploration program in 2011 – appeared in the emerging geopolitical environment in need for security and energy partnerships. For Israel, Cyprus – and consequently Greece – was a reasonable choice since both shared similar security concerns and were interested for potential energy cooperation. After all, as Efraim Inbar noted, “about 90 percent of Israel's foreign trade is carried out via the Mediterranean Sea, making freedom of navigation in this area critical for the Jewish state's economic well-being.”¹⁶

Israel-Cyprus-Greece (and Egypt)

It was against this geopolitical background that the Israel-Cyprus-Greece cooperation emerged, while recently, another partnership began developing between Cyprus, Greece and Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, as Cairo's relations with Turkey have also deteriorated after the ouster of the

¹⁴ Carol Migdalovitz, “Israel's Blockade of Gaza, the *Mavi Marmara* Incident, and its Aftermath,” CRS Report for Congress (June 2010), Congressional Research Service; Sebnem Arsu, “Amid Tensions With Israel, Turkey Threatens Increased Naval Presence,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/07/world/middleeast/07turkey.html> [accessed 10 April 2015]; “PM: Turkey to impose more sanctions on Israel, boost presence in east Med,” *Today's Zaman*, 6 September 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-255903-pm-turkey-to-impose-more-sanctions-on-israel-boost-presence-in-east-med.html> [accessed 10 April 2015].

¹⁵ Efraim Inbar, “The Strategic Implications for Israel,” in *The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications*, ed. Efraim Inbar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 145-165 (145-157).

¹⁶ Efraim Inbar, “Israel's Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Middle East Quarterly* 21:4 (2014), 1-12 (1).

Muslim Brotherhood from power – a development Turkey criticized ferociously. The two trilateral partnerships have been further strengthened by agreements on various political, economic, energy and military issues.¹⁷ The Cairo Declaration that followed the trilateral summit of Egypt, Greece and Cyprus in Egypt, on 08 November 2014, noted: “We share the conviction that this first Summit Meeting will pave the way to a new era of tripartite partnership promoting peace, stability, security and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean in all fields (political, economic, trade, culture, tourism).”¹⁸

In the same document the leaders of the three states also acknowledged the vital security problems in the Middle East region, the need for the resolution of the Cyprus Problem and the need to deal with the security threats and to collaborate in the energy sector in favour of regional security and stability.¹⁹ These goals and sentiments were reiterated in the Nicosia Declaration, the product of their second trilateral summit that took place in Cyprus on 29 April 2015.²⁰

It is evident that today there is a new set of perceptions and convergences of interests that could affect the Eastern Mediterranean balance of power, having though in mind that it would be premature to argue that new “alliances” have been formed. Although there are many benefits that can come out of these developing relationships, the glue that is holding them together is

¹⁷ For example, Amanda Midkiff, “Shifting Dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Developing Relationship Between Greece and Israel,” *Perspectives on Business and Economics*, 30 (2012), 45-53; “Greek Cyprus Ratifies Military Cooperation Deal with Israel,” *Today’s Zaman*, 03 July 2012, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=285431 [accessed 10 April 2015]. See also, “Greece, Israel sign pact on security cooperation,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency (05 September 2011), <http://www.jta.org/2011/09/05/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/greece-israel-sign-pact-on-security-cooperation> [accessed 13 April 2015]; “EuroAsia Interconnector,” 2014, <http://www.euroasia-interconnector.com/> [accessed 13 April 2015]; “Israel, Cyprus sign defense agreements - reports,” *Globes*, 10 January 2012, <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-1000714277> [accessed 13 April 2015]; Asher Zeiger, “Israel, Greece, Cyprus sign energy and water deal,” *The Times of Israel*, 08 August 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-greece-cyprus-sign-energy-and-water-deal/> [accessed 13 April 2015].

¹⁸ “Egypt-Greece-Cyprus Trilateral Summit Cairo Declaration,” 09 November 2014, <http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2006.nsf/All/B2AF4B08214D31D5C2257D8D002AF831?OpenDocument> [accessed 13 April 2015].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Nicosia Declaration,” Cyprus News Agency, 29 April 2015, <http://www.cna.org.cy/webnewsEN.asp?a=e4f1917b4c3f45858481a187b28740d5> [accessed 30 April 2015]

Turkey. Its power projections and its efforts to impose its hegemony over the region have naturally produced opposition. Against the backdrop of poor relations with Turkey, Cyprus and Greece have joined forces with Israel and Egypt, giving rise to an opposing geopolitical pole that contradicts the aims of Turkish foreign policy. In the traditional realpolitik sense, this is an effort to at least balance out Turkey's relative power stature in the Eastern Mediterranean; at the same time, it can be seen as a form of political and ideological resistance to Turkey's hegemonic efforts over the Middle Eastern region. For the RoC, the emerging partnerships also constitute a way of drawing international support for its efforts to resolve the long-standing Cyprus Problem.

Unquestionably, the emerging bilateral dynamics challenges Ankara's strategic objectives to an important extent. To begin with, it is reflective of the fact that Turkey lost much of its post-"Arab Spring" ideological and political clout in the Arab World and especially in Egypt. Perhaps more importantly, Turkey seems to have been "frozen out" of the plans for energy and security collaboration in the Eastern Mediterranean, at least for the time being.²¹ As a result, it could potentially face obstacles in the achievement of at least two of its strategic energy goals: to emerge as a regional energy hub and to become an energy supplier of the European market. With regard to the former, Ankara stated that after the completion of a number of projects "it is anticipated that 6 to 7 % of global oil supply will transit Turkey and that Ceyhan will become a major energy hub and the largest oil outlet terminal in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Ceyhan Terminal has already been designed to receive crude oil from different countries."²²

The same aspirations apply for natural gas. Of course the European Union (EU) still considers Turkey as an alternative energy supplier to Russia.²³ And

²¹ Daniel Dombey, Heba Saleh, and John Reed, "Egypt and Cyprus Freeze out Turkey in Possible Gas Deal," *Financial Times*, 25 November 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/90dcafea-74bb-11e4-8321-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3VsFjYqsw> [accessed 30 April 2015]; Gedalyah Reback, "Israeli-Greek-Cypriot Alliance Challenges Turkey in the Med," *Israel National News*, 09 March 2015, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/192357#.VRwZEvmVIul> [accessed 30 April 2015]. Moreover, there is the perception that the rift between Turkey and Egypt is very personal and concerns the enmity between Erdogan and al-Sisi. This makes their (energy) cooperation an even more difficult problem to solve while at the same time entails that should one of these leaders leaves the political scene, Turkey and Egypt may well mend fences. From author's discussion with an Egyptian official from Egypt's oil and gas industry (March, 2015).

²² "Turkey's Energy Strategy," 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkeys-energy-strategy.en.mfa> [accessed 30 April 2015].

while Europe's energy supply from Turkey, and the rest of the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, is not necessarily mutually exclusive, Ankara's options and energy-hub potential decrease when Cypriot and Israeli gas are removed from the equation. In this light it can be suggested that the new geopolitical landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Israel-Cyprus-Greece partnership in particular, pose obstacles to Turkish foreign policy without that, however, necessarily entailing that Turkey is completely isolated or marginalized.

The partnership's future and the Israeli position

The Israel-Cyprus-Greece partnership has a lot of potential and it is not implausible to see it evolving even further. However, its character and goals in the long run are far from certain; they are in many ways related to Israel's foreign policy decisions and its relations with Turkey. Leaving aside the mutual energy and economic benefits that derive from the trilateral relationship, for Cyprus and Greece it is important to have Israel by their sides as a means of dealing with Turkey. This dynamic, however, may not be sustainable as it deepens the gap between Turkey and Israel. According to one analyst:

While Israel has increased its cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, at times coming to the defense of Cypriot interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is also cautious not to further damage its relationship with Turkey. In conclusion, Israel's interests in maintaining the status quo with Turkey has established a ceiling on how enthusiastic its relationship can be with other regional actors, like Greece and Cyprus.²⁴

From this perspective, the trilateral partnership functions – at least for Cyprus and Greece – as a strategic counterweight to Turkey. Thus one may assume that a Turkish-Israeli rapprochement and the Israel-Cyprus-Greece relationship are mutually exclusive; yet Israel's understanding is different. Jerusalem appreciates the strategic benefits of its relation with Cyprus and Greece and,

²³ European Commission, "European Energy Strategy," Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM 330 Final (2014); Miguel Arias Canete, "EU-Turkey High Level Energy Dialogue and Strategic Energy Cooperation," European Commission, 17 March 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/commission/2014-2019/arias-canete/announcements/eu-turkey-high-level-energy-dialogue-and-strategic-energy-cooperation_en [accessed 30 April 2015].

²⁴ Author's Interview with Gabriel Mitchell, PhD candidate in Government & International Affairs at Virginia Tech University and the Israel-Turkey Project Coordinator at Mitvim – the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies (March, 2015).

provided the necessary political will exists, it is even open to see the partnership evolving to a more solid strategic cooperation.²⁵ At the same time, Israel sees its relations with Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece independently from each other,²⁶ in an effort to maintain a multidimensional regional foreign policy that would minimize the costs and maximize the benefits.

In this sense, the partnership in question could also signify a break from Israel's tradition of uneasy and temporary alliances (see France, South Africa and most recently Turkey),²⁷ by becoming permanent and stable. Both geographic proximity and energy prospects could contribute to a future of common interests. Moreover, the fact that the multileveled cooperation between Israel, Cyprus and Greece does not face any significant opposition from Arab states or Great Powers creates an even more favoring environment. Minor challenges may be expected from the Palestinian lobby, Lebanon and Iran. With regards to the former, the traditionally good relations that Cyprus and Greece²⁸ maintain with the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular²⁹ may lead to some – yet limited – Palestinian pressure for less cooperation with Israel.³⁰ In parallel, the maritime dispute between Israel and Lebanon³¹ is an

²⁵ Author's interview with Israeli official A [name of interviewee in possession of the author] (March, 2015).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jane Hunter, "The Israeli-South African-U.S. Alliance," *The Link* 19:1 (1986), 1-13; Guy Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-1959," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45:2 (2010), 406-429.

²⁸ The election of Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) to power in Greece (January, 2015) stirred fears among Israeli circles that pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli feelings would increase in the Greek Government, given Syriza's past political stance on these matters. However, not only did the new government not challenge Greece's relationship with Israel, but vowed to deepen it. See "The Victory of Syriza in Greece is bad news for Israel," *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 January 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Analysis-The-victory-of-Syriza-in-Greece-is-bad-news-for-Israel-388960> [accessed 30 April 2015]; Herb Keinon, "Visiting Greek Specialist: Core of Jerusalem-Athens ties Remain Strong," *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 March 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Visiting-Greek-specialist-Core-of-Jerusalem-Athens-ties-remain-strong-393653> [accessed 30 April 2015].

²⁹ See "Cyprus recognizes Palestinian states within 1967 borders," *Haaretz*, 30 January 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-cyprus-recognizes-palestinian-states-within-1967-borders-1.340169> [accessed 30 April 2015]; "Cyprus formally recognizes State of Palestine," *Al Akhbar*, 08 February 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14906> [accessed 30 April 2015].

³⁰ Author's interview with Israeli official A.

issue “in which Iran may have some interest;” and while Israel is “concerned about the potential of sabotage of its offshore platforms by Iranian proxies [...] the subject is outside of Tehran’s purview.”³²

Turkish-Israeli Relations

Eventually, what will matter are Israel’s strategic assessments and the regional repercussions of Turkish foreign policy. Currently, it seems that Turkey under the AKP, and President Erdogan more specifically, has a difficult time to distinguish between its relations with Israel³³ and its pro-Arab/Muslim communication policy. In spite of Israeli political will for reconciliation with Turkey,³⁴ Ankara’s actions, as expressed through frequent criticism of Israel and tolerance of anti-Semitism, indicate a reluctance to normalize its relations with Jerusalem; this, arguably, has some impact on the character of the trilateral partnership and the involvement of Egypt.

Although Israel’s declared policy is to have positive relations with all state players in the region and to maintain creative ties with both Turkey as well as Cyprus-Greece, a fundamental shift in Turkish-Israeli relations will undoubtedly affect the Israel-Cyprus-Greece partnership. This does not mean that diplomatic relations will automatically deteriorate but, in such an occasion, arguably the character of the partnership will probably change, especially if Jerusalem decides to orientate its energy exports toward Turkey. Such an undertaking would entail significant geopolitical risk and, as proven in the past few years, uncertain political repercussions. In this regard, it is highly questionable whether the estimated less expensive option of an Israeli-Turkish pipeline would actually be the most beneficial one (as opposed to a Cyprus-Israel pipeline and a Liquefied Natural Gas plant in Cyprus).³⁵

³¹ See Martin Wählisch, “Israel-Lebanon Offshore Oil & Gas Dispute - Rules of International Maritime Law,” *ASIL Insights* 15:31 (2011), <http://www.asil.org/insights/volume/15/issue/31/israel-lebanon-offshore-oil-gas-dispute-%E2%80%93-rules-international-maritime> [accessed 30 April 2015].

³² Author’s Interview with Gabriel Mitchell.

³³ This refers mainly to their security, diplomatic, military and energy ties. On the economic front, and specifically trade, Turkish-Israeli relations have reached record high levels despite political problems; see Koray Tekin, “Turkish-Israeli trade booms despite harsh rhetoric,” *Today’s Zaman*, 20 January 2015, http://www.todayszaman.com/business_turkish-israeli-trade-booms-despite-harsh-rhetoric_370381.html [accessed 30 April 2015].

³⁴ Israel’s apology to Turkey in March, 2013, for the *Mavi Marmara* incident was a big step to that direction but it has not borne fruits thus far.

³⁵ See Theodore Tsakiris, “The Case Against an Israeli-Turkish Export Pipeline,” ELIAMEP Briefing Notes, 25/2013 (2013).

For Jerusalem, a strong Turkey-Israel cooperation makes sense because of military-intelligence issues and Western interests, as much as cooperation with Cyprus and Greece is imperative due to vital maritime trade and energy export routes, to say the least³⁶ – regardless of the political problems between Greece-Cyprus and Turkey. Therefore, Israel should take into account all these parameters while trying to develop a multidimensional foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean; a foreign policy that will be able to build stable, sustainable and beneficial relationships in a region that is already greatly hostile to Israel.

Another rather timely scenario that might alter Eastern Mediterranean dynamics, presumably for the best, is the potential resolution of the Cyprus Problem. Given that it has thus far been an obstacle to regional cooperation, it would not be implausible to see Greek-Turkish and Cypriot-Turkish relations undergoing positive changes should a viable, functional and socially acceptable settlement occurs in Cyprus. Such a prospect could easily prompt improvements in the relations between Turkey and Israel, while Israel itself supports the peace process in Cyprus with the hope that a settlement will open up new possibilities for peace and stability.³⁷

Conclusions

This paper set out to evaluate regional relations in the Eastern Mediterranean and Israel's position in particular. It examined the historical background and the motivations behind the newly developed partnership between Israel-Cyprus-Greece, and interpreted its character, prospects, and Israel's role and importance in the region, under the light of Turkish-Israeli relations. It suggested that Turkish foreign policy provided the ground for the closer cooperation between Israel, Cyprus and Greece, and later Egypt. The new partnership, which acts as a regional counterweight to Turkey's relative power, also expands to significant sectors of cooperation such as energy, economy and security. Provided that the necessary political will among the partners continues, the future of the partnership is generally deemed promising though its character may change on the eventuality of a Turkish-Israeli reconciliation.

³⁶ See Gedalyah Reback, "Israeli-Greek-Cypriot Alliance Challenges Turkey in the Med;" Thanos Dokos, "The Prospects for Greek-Israeli Relations: A View from Athens," ELIAMEP Briefing Notes, 11/2013 (2013); Theodoros Tsakiris, "Shifting Sands or Burning Bridges," ELIAMEP Policy Paper, 22 (2014), 30-37.

³⁷ Author's interview with Israeli official A.

As noted earlier, the resolution of the Cyprus Problem would also be an important development that could, under conditions, have a positive impact on the international relations of the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkish-Israeli relations more specifically. A significant point of regional geopolitical friction would belong to the past. That would be an ideal state of affairs for all states involved and the region more generally. But even from today's point of view, Israel's regional and international position will certainly benefit, in the short and long term, from a deeper relationship with Greece and Cyprus, as they constitute important partners in the Eastern Mediterranean and a vital political, energy, security and economic link between Israel and Europe.