

COMMENTARY

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Turnaround in the Israeli-Greek Relations

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Ever since the May 2010 Israeli naval operations aboard the Gaza-bound *Mavi Marmara* and the resultant diplomatic set-back to Israeli-Turkish ties, there has been a significant warming up the Israeli-Greek relationships. This has been marked by the increased frequency of the visits from both the countries, including that of prime ministers and other political leaders. Without further delay, Israel and Greece have gone afar to uplift their bilateral relationships that remained dormant even though their diplomatic relationship was established almost two decades ago.

The atmospherics are very different today than in the 1980s and 1990s, when the relationship between Israel and Greece remained very cold. Greek leader Andreas Papandreou, who was also an unabashed friend of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, did not promote any interaction with the Jewish State. However, the relationship between the two began to improve remarkably since the mid-1990s, particularly after the demise of Andreas in June 1996. The significant rapprochement has become very visible with the rise in the volume of trade between them followed by several military agreements. Today, when Israel's relation with Turkey is not as smooth as before, Greece and Israel are beginning to see common grounds in broader strategic terms. Such a quick cementing of ties is well attributed to the recent developments that have taken place between them, exploring potential opportunities for cooperation- political, economic and military.

Political Dimension

As a mark of strengthening political relations, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou visited Israel in July 2010, and happened to be the first Greek Prime Minister to visit the Jewish state since Konstantinos Mitsotakis in 1992. Presently, under George Papandreou Greece carries a favourable policy towards Israel unlike his father Andreas Papandreou, who openly criticized Israel and adopted more pro-Arab policies which were responsible for very cold and insignificant ties between Israel and Greece. His visit opened more opportunities for both the countries to cooperate on various sectors, including trade, defence and security and enhanced political engagement. This kind of rapprochement was not visible when the Israeli-Turkish ties flourished. Greece could not forge strategic relationship with the Jewish state especially since that spot was firmly occupied by Turkey; but that was before the flotilla incident.

Simultaneously, Israel on one hand found an opportunity to look out for a partnership in Greece when its relations with Turkey began to fade after the Gaza operation in 2008 and with that of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy pursuits. Also, verbal spats between Turkish prime minister and Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos after the flotilla raid further poisoned their relationship. In a quick succession to Papandreou's visit, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Greece in August 2010; first-ever visit by an Israeli premier. This reciprocal move has gestured the warming of relationships between the two.

However, there are sections who have expressed that such a visit by the Israeli premier should not be viewed as an attempt to counter Turkey's downgrading of its ties with the Jewish state by getting closer to Greece. Rather, it is considered to be foreign policy pursuits of Israel to escape isolation in the region as its image is getting tarnished because of the events such as 2008 Gaza operations, flotilla raid, etc. Even though there has been a freeze at diplomatic level, trade relations between Israel and Turkey are still open.

For the furtherance of ties, Israel and Greece have discussed tourism, military issues, renewable energy and water resources during Netanyahu's visit. In the recently held meetings, discussions on military cooperation have become an important agenda to strengthen the ties. Apart from this, both the countries have shared common interests in exporting the recently discovered natural gas (which Israel discovered in the Mediterranean Sea) to other parts of Europe. Most importantly, Greece has also expressed its desire to assume a more significant mediatory role in the Arab-Israeli peace process which is in limbo at the moment. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Greece in January 2011 and discussed efforts to accelerate the relations and boost trade, taking advantage of the rapprochement with Greece after years of frosty relations.

Military Cooperation

If one traces the history, Israel and Greece laid plans for military cooperation as far back as in 1994. But, the intensity of an actual engagement has been very low and sporadic as compared to that of Turkish-Israeli relationship which shared close military and intelligence cooperation. The main reason for this poor military cooperation was attributed to the Arab factor. This is partially because of Greece's dependency on the Arab crude oil. As a result, no concrete steps were seen to be taken up by both the sides.

After the death of Andreas Papandreou in 1996, hopes for cooperation in military arena resurfaced again. In 1997, Israeli Air Force Commander Eitan Ben Elyahou visited Athens and suggested that the Israeli Aircraft Industry could help modernize 40 Greek F-4 Phantom jets. It was during this visit when he expressed the Israeli willingness to sell Greece detachable oil tanks for F-16. Unfortunately, none of these above agreements materialized as they happened amid a robust Israeli-Turkish military and strategic cooperation. For Israel, any such strategic cooperation with Greece would complicate its existing relationship with Turkey.

However, considering the recent developments, the military cooperation between Israel and Greece is getting revived at a rapid pace. During the visit of Netanyahu, leaders from the both countries discussed the possibilities for an expansion of the military ties, including sharing technical know-how and holding joint drills. It should be noted that Greece had cancelled the joint air force exercise with Israel following the Israeli commandos' raid on the Gaza-bound flotilla in May 2010. The manoeuvres code named *Minoas 201* was expected to run until 3 June 2010, and consisted of aerial manoeuvres and knowledge exchange involving 10 Israeli F-16 and F-15 fighters. In fact, Greece air force had already begun joint training exercises with Israel off the southern Mediterranean island of Crete in early May of the same year.

Despite the above cancellation, both the countries did not take much time to accelerate the military cooperation. It was sometime in early October 2010, when media reported about an altogether new military exercises between Israel and Greece. According to the reports, the military exercise constituted of eight Israeli helicopters along with Greece's three helicopters and six fighter jets. The drill was carried out by UH-60 and AH-64 helicopters from the Israel Air Force, along with Apaches, AS332 Super Puma and fighters from the Hellenic Air Force. The operations taken up by both the countries involved simulated aerial combat, attacks on terrestrial targets, aerial refuelling and search and rescue missions. Such a military cooperation, beginning with a joint air-exercise in Greece airspace, is advantageous for Israel too considering its limited airspace after Turkey rejected its airspace for the Israeli air force manoeuvres.

The first ever air military exercises between Israel and Greece were carried out in the first week of June 2008. This particular event was highly criticized by Iran as it was perceived to be a rehearsal for a potential military attack on its nuclear facilities. Towards enhancing military partnerships, the Israeli defence industries are believed to be in talks with Greece for a possible multi-million dollar sale of advanced weapons systems for its fleet of F-16 fighter jets.

Non-military Cooperation

Taking the relations to new heights, Israel and Greece signed an aviation treaty, during the visit of Greek Foreign Minister Dimitris Droutas to Israel in October 2010. First of its kind since 1952, it is likely to promote tourism between the two countries, particularly since the number of Israeli tourists to Turkey has plummeted drastically since the flotilla raid. For Greece whose economy heavily depends on the tourism industry, such a rapid rapprochement is a boon. Since the mid-2010, there has been a 40 percent increase in Israeli tourism to Greece and the number of the tourists was estimated at about 250,000 by October 2010 as compared to 155,000 in 2009.

In latest developments, exploratory talks between Israel and Greece have begun on transporting the recently discovered Israeli natural gas to Europe. This offshore gas found in the Mediterranean is considered to be the largest natural gas find in the history of Israel with an estimated 16 trillion cubic metres of gas. Greece's Investment Minister Harris Pamboukis has said that his country would also see how it can play a role as a transportation hub and service centre since its roads are naturally connected to the Balkans and Europe. Simultaneously, Israel is believed to be talking to Cyprus, another close ally of Greece, for a possible cooperation on liquefied natural gas.

Both Israel and Greece are trying unrelentingly to carve out different channels for cooperation to further strengthen their ties. Apart from the aforementioned areas of convergence, an endeavour to set up a regional force to deal with natural disasters is underway. Israel had to rely on its neighbouring countries to contain the deadly wildfire in Mount Carmel near Haifa that claimed several lives towards the end of 2010. As a mark of solidarity and the significance of the new-found relationship, Greek Prime Minister, despite his ongoing meeting with the Polish president, was believed to have responded to his Israeli counterpart's phone call asking for assistance in dousing the fire. In a matter of few hours after this telephonic conversation, five Greece fire-fighting planes along with a cargo plane took off for Israel loaded with spare parts, mechanics and pilots. Such a quick response showcased the burgeoning of relationships between these two countries which until May 1991 when full relations were established.

At a time when Israel's relations with its long-term ally Turkey remains estranged, friendship with Greece would be of great asset. This is because Greece seems to be a natural ally in the Eastern Mediterranean region largely dominated by Islamic countries. Simultaneously, Greece's

hopes to get closer to the United States are likely to be fulfilled due to its rapprochement with the Jewish state. Enhancement of relationship with Israel will be of immense help for Greece as it is facing an unprecedented economic crisis. Most importantly, it can also play a mediatory role in the stalled Middle East process by breaking the deadlock over direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

However, Israel and Greece would also be treading very carefully. Keeping in mind Greece's traditional alliance with the Arab states, striking a delicate balance in its relationship with the Jewish state should be among the most important foreign policy challenges. It is very understandable that Greece provides Israel a stop-gap measure, but fitting into the Turkey's shoe will be a time taking process.

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