

PEACE AND SECURITY

# FES SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE: ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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April 2021

- The Eastern Mediterranean emerged in the last decade as a new focus of Israeli strategic interests. The discovery of substantial gas depots in Israel's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean and Israel's newly acquired reliance on them for its energy needs turned Israeli attention West.

- Part of this turn to the sea includes a quasi-alliance with Greece and Cyprus and involvement in a nascent regional organization, the Cairo-based EastMed Gas Forum, founded by the Hellenic states, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority and grew later to include France.

- With growing tensions between the Hellenic states and Turkey, the EastMed Gas forum and the Israeli-Hellenic alliance may assume a more significant role as they offer European actors a framework to stabilize and possibly even benefit from the region.



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## 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Eastern Mediterranean emerged in the last decade as a new focus of Israeli strategic interests. Traditionally, the region was an afterthought in Israeli thinking. It posed no major threat, nor did it hold a significant promise. However, This state of affairs saw a dramatic shift that accelerated in the last decade. The discovery of substantial gas depots in Israel's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean and Israel's newly acquired reliance on them for its energy needs turned Israeli attention West. Part of this turn to the sea includes a quasi-alliance with Greece and Cyprus and involvement in a nascent regional organization, the Cairo-based EastMed Gas Forum, founded by the Hellenic states, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority and grew later to include France. In part, with Israel's encouragement, the US offers support, of sorts, to both the Israeli-Hellenic alliance and the Gas Forum, which it joined as an observer in March 2021. The EU is a natural ally; it extended support to the forum and entered it as an observer. With growing tensions between the Hellenic states and Turkey, the forum and the Israeli-Hellenic alliance may assume a more significant role. At a minimum, they offer European actors another framework to stabilize and possibly even benefit from the region.

## 2 ISRAELI INTERESTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Traditionally, Israel did not view the Eastern Mediterranean as an essential strategic arena. For most of its existence, the region posed no threat to Israel, even though most of Israel's population is concentrated in the sea's immediate littoral. Moreover, as much of Israel's supplies, such as food, arrive via the sea, Arab enemy navies could have assisted in blockading Israel's supplies during armed conflicts. However, Israel's traditional security doctrine called for swift, decisive and ground-based victories, which obviated a need for a severe Israeli maritime response. Indeed, even major armed clashes that were driven by Arab behavior on the seas - such as the 1956 and 1967 wars - were resolved on land with a limited maritime response. Perhaps more broadly, the lack of interest in the region was also a result of a general Israeli disinterest in the seas during most of the years of the state's existence. Israel's founders had no significant maritime tradition in their countries of origin. For most of its years, essentially Israel's economy had not included a substantial maritime sector, and Mediterranean culture was marginalized in Israel, in part, as it was in decline in the region as a whole. There were short bursts of greater interest in the seas - such as during the 1945-1948 effort to bring illegal immigrants into Mandatory Palestine via boats or the buildup of a modest commercial fleet following the German reparations 1960s. However, for the most part, the East Mediterranean was perceived as marginal. This state of affairs underwent a rather dramatic change in the last decade. The once almost forgotten region had emerged as an important arena for Israeli strategy and activity. There are two interrelated pillars for this turn to the sea: Israel's discovery of natural gas at the seabed in its Exclusive Economic Zone in the Mediterranean and the related alliance with Cyprus and Greece. It is further supported by disparate secondary developments such as the change in the focus of the armed aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the inland West Bank to the sea-shore Gaza Strip, Israel's new reliance on desalinated water from the Mediterranean, and the increase of tensions with Iran, that also spilled into the maritime space.

### 2.1 ENERGY

Beginning in 1999, significant gas fields were discovered in the Israeli Exclusive Economic Zone in the Mediterranean. The most important discovery was made in 2010 -- the Leviathan field - which has some 605 BCM (Billion Cubic Meters). From a once energy-deprived nation, the findings are expected to support Israel's gas needs for decades and leave enough for export. By 2020, some 64% of Israeli energy was produced by using its sea-based gas, while some are exported to two Arab nations; it has peace accords with Jordan and Egypt.

Preliminary deals were secured for supplying the Palestinian Authority and for transferring gas to Europe with Cypriote and Greek cooperation. Although all these gas assets are private (indeed, some are partly owned by non-Israeli corporations) Israel, in effect, decided that they are of national strategic value. In 2013, the government assigned responsibility for their protection to the Israel Defense Force. In turn, the navy expanded, buying four Sa'ar 6 class boats from German Naval Yards Holdings and ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2 HELLENIC ALLIANCE

Starting in the last years of the 2000s, Israel grew closer to Greece and Cyprus, forming what Cypriote scholar Zenonas Tziarras calls a "quasi-alliance." These relationships were driven by an alignment around the gas interests in the region and a common concern about the behavior of Turkey. Ankara and Jerusalem were allies in the 1990s, though much of the alliance had a terrestrial focus, with their joint concerns about Syria, that occupies the space between them. However, by the 2000s, President Erdogan's foreign policy turned away from Israel. The tension became a full-fledged crisis when Israeli forces captured in 2010 a Turkish ship, the Mavi Marmara, that tried to challenge Israel's blockade of the Hamas-Controlled Gaza Strip. Ten Turkish activists that resisted the capture were killed.<sup>2</sup> A 2013 American-brokered deal to resolve the issue did not restore Israeli-Turkish relations. In terms of energy, the Israeli-Hellenic quasi-alliance includes a joint plan to lay a pipe that will bring East-Mediterranean gas to Europe. In early 2020, Israeli-Cypriote and Greek heads of state signed an agreement to promote The 1,900-kilometer project. It is being developed by IGI Poseidon SA, a joint venture of Greece's state-owned supplier Depa SA and Italy's Edison SpA. Many experts doubt that the project will ever take off, but the political leadership of the three-way alliance continues to signal its commitment to it. In July 2020, for example, the Israeli cabinet approved the January 2020 trilateral agreement. The quasi-alliance further includes joint military exercises. Among other aspects, the Cypriote landscape allowed Israeli ground forces to train in a terrain similar to Lebanon's, while drills in Greece's permitted air-space the air force to train in long-distance flying, which might be required in a future confrontation with Iran. Though not mentioned in public, the alliance is a possible framework to contain Turkey's growing efforts to project power and influence in the region. In the immediate Israeli context, Jerusalem does not see favorably Ankara's support of Hamas and its efforts to gain a foothold in other locations such as East Jerusalem.

<sup>1</sup> The deal had broader social and political ramifications, as it turned out that a number of people, including the former commander of the Israeli navy, as well as close associates of Prime Minister Netanyahu, were suspected in securing bribes for aspects of the deal. This led to public calls for a police investigation into the Prime Minister's role in the deal.

<sup>2</sup> Nine activists were killed on board the ship and a tenth died from his wounds in 2014

## 2.3 FREEDOM OF OPERATION

Israeli naval forces were used to operating rather freely in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond for decades. They enforce a naval blockade on Gaza. They occasionally search, and at times, seize the cargo of ships carrying arms mostly from Iran to Hamas controlled Gaza and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The navy further secures Israel's shores from potential seaborne attacks from Gaza and Lebanon. This freedom of operation is somewhat challenged by the Russian naval presence in the region, which has intensified since 2015. The possibility of an Iranian naval base in Syria, as well as hints that Teheran might offer naval escorts in the Red Sea for vessels carrying arms to the region, may present a further challenge.

## 2.4 REGIONAL LEGITIMACY

Both the gas assets and the alliance with the Hellenic states opened new avenues for Israeli integration into the region. More conceptually, they assist both the region and Israel in creating a new regional category - the Eastern Mediterranean - that offers Israel the possibility of an easy and stable acceptance and possible integration. Not fully Middle-Eastern and not fully European, Israel should fit more easily into a Mediterranean identity that already accepts both Arab and non-Arab countries and focuses on joint regional issues. Though only a very preliminary humble step, the Cairo-based EastMed gas forum is a first possible institutionalized manifestation of a distinct East-Med framework. The nascent regional organization was an Egyptian initiative and was launched gradually starting in October of 2018, until the founding members signed its statute in September 2020 and came into force in March 2021. It is based in Cairo and includes Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Italy. France joined in March 2021. The US and the EU enjoy observer status. The World Bank and the US also extended their support. While focused on gas issues, it also offers the potential for greater regional cooperation. Israel's advanced port facilities in the Mediterranean offer another possible vector of legitimacy if they serve as an entry/exit point for products from Arab hinterlands such as Iraq and the Gulf. The September 2020 Abraham accord between Israel and the UAE opened the way for a possible joint Israeli-Emirati private bid to buy portions of the Israeli port of Haifa. Israel is also part of the Euro-Med Regulators Group (EMERG), an independent platform of Regulatory Authorities for Electronic Communications Networks and Services. Indeed, it now chairs one of its working groups and is expected to chair the organization in 2022.

## 2.5 MARITIME BORDERS AND UNIONIZATION AGREEMENTS

The growing set of interests drove Israel to try and settle its maritime boundaries. The stability the norm offers is a precondition for gas exploration and production. Although Israel did

not sign the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, it does accept it as international customary law. In 2010 it agreed on a maritime boundary in Cyprus, and it seems it had been discussing setting the border with Egypt. Israel and Lebanon disagreed on a maritime boundary. Israelis are concerned that an open dispute over boundaries with Lebanon would serve as an excuse for Hezbollah to justify its continued belligerent posture towards Israel. The US has been mediating the conflict for several years, and in September 2020 brought the two parties together for four rounds of direct negotiations held in a UN base. However, the talks were postponed in November 2020 as Lebanon presented new demands that both Israel and the US felt were not constructive. On its Western edge, and despite their close alliance, Israel and Cyprus did not conclude yet a unionization accord that would regulate profit sharing from their two adjacent fields of Aphrodite (the larger and Cypriote one) and Yishai (and smaller and Israeli one)

## 2.6 ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

For more than a decade, Israel saw a growing public interest in protecting the marine environment, spearheaded by civil society organizations and the increasing interest in academia in Israel's marine spaces. Among other reasons, these issues consolidated due to Israel newly created reliance (starting in several increasing the 2010s) on desalination facilities on the Mediterranean shore, the (unsuccessful) civil society campaign that was launched in the late 2010s against the Leviathan gas rig that was built some 10 KM of the shore in Israel's northern sector, and a massive oil spill that hit Israel in February 2021.

## 3 STRATEGIES: WHERE DOES EUROPE FIT?

Israel's efforts to safeguard its interests in the East Mediterranean do not include any significant reliance on a European security framework. This, despite the fact that Israel has been engaged in EU and NATO southern flank efforts such as the EU's Barcelona Process and NATO'S Mediterranean Dialogue. Israel's policies in the Eastern Mediterranean do include cooperation with individual EU states. First and foremost, Greece and Cyprus. The Israeli-Hellenic plans to lay a gas pipe, should they materialize, will lead to greater engagement with Italy and France, both members of the EastMed Gas Forum. The company that is to develop the project is, as noted, a joint Italian-Greek venture. Moreover, the pipe's last section is to connect Greece to Italy. Italian leaders, however, sent mixed messages about their country's commitment to pursuing it. Finally, French signals in the fall of 2020 that it would support Greece against Turkey's assertiveness (including a possible basing of French planes in Greek air force bases), which may create an overlap in interests between Paris and Jerusalem. In the last two decades or so both countries are getting closer in terms of security cooperation, including joint air drills, and visits of French navy vessels in Israel.

## 4 INSTITUTIONS AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

### 4.1 BARCELONA PROCESS, EUROMED DIALOGUE, AND THE UNION OF MEDITERRANEAN

As noted, Israel was and is involved in the EU's "North-South" efforts. It participated in the 1995 Barcelona conference, represented by then foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Ehud Barak. It was a member of the EuroMed partnership that evolved from it. When the EuroMed partnership transformed, in effect, into the Union for the Mediterranean, Israel began taking an even more active role. An Israeli scholar, Professor Ilan Chet, was appointed Deputy Secretary-General (2010-2016). Israel is also home to one of the organization's on-going jewel projects: the East Mediterranean International boarding School (EMIS), based in Ha'kfar Ha'Yarok. The organization also serves as a useful platform for some other regional exchanges, such as on environmental issues. At the same time, Israel's involvement in the Union for the Mediterranean does not address in any meaningful way its core foreign and security interests in the region.

### 4.2 NATO'S MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE

Israel has been involved in NATO's Mediterranean dialogue since it was launched in 1994, and through its expansion in the 2004 Istanbul conference. Israel was the first Mediterranean dialogue partner in the group to sign an individual cooperation program (ICP) with NATO in 2006. A decade later, it was the first member of the group (alongside Jordan) to open a diplomatic mission to the organization. The partnership also allowed Israel to deploy a liaison officer at NATO's maritime command. The framework was also a useful forum to engage, to a degree, with security officials from Arab states. At the same time, Israel has an ongoing direct, bilateral, and intimate relationship with NATO members, most notably the US, Germany, and Greece. Israel has been traditionally in two minds regarding forums such as the Mediterranean dialogue. On the one hand, membership in this forum, especially since it includes Arab partners, confers further legitimacy for Israel. On the other hand, for tactical diplomatic reasons, it prefers bilateral engagements to regional or international ones. Jerusalem perceived larger forums, especially regional forums, as potentially hostile to it due to an automatic Arab majority and a "race to the bottom" between them in terms of signaling a harsh line towards Israel.

### 4.3 OSCE MEDITERRANEAN PARTNER

Israel is one of six Mediterranean countries that are OSCE Mediterranean partners. Israel joined the group upon its

establishment in 1994, and has engaged with the group ever since, including the hosting of a seminar in 2013. However, the group does not serve as a significant forum for Jerusalem to advance its foreign and security agenda.

## 5 FUTURE COOPERATION

Against the traditional background of marginal relevance for most "North-South" European cooperation mechanisms for Israel's core security interests, current realities in the East Mediterranean offer a unique opportunity structure for a greater European role. Due to the nature of the challenges, the European contribution could go beyond military and hard security aspects. First, European institutions could assist in developing the Israeli-Cypriot gas route to Europe. Italy's role is crucial, as it is the expected final destination of the pipe, and an Italian corporation is a co-owner of the company that is to develop the pipe. Second, both Israel and the Europeans are facing a more assertive Russia and a more economically active China. This creates opportunities for exchanges and possibly a joint effort to understand and respond to these developments. Third, both the Europeans and Israel follow with some concern an assertive Turkey that focuses much of its recent energies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Here, again, there is a possibility to exchange and coordination, as well as possible mediation. European actors, notably Italy and France, alongside Cyprus and Greece, participate in the nascent regional organization, the EastMed Gas Forum. They could bring both resources, experience, and material assets to further develop the organization and perhaps extend its gamut. Finally, the Europeans could support the implementation of a norm-based solution to the tension in the region, through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. With all emerging tensions, including the Israeli-Lebanese question of maritime boundary, all actors try to operate within the existing international normative framework. This is a rather unique situation in the region and one in which the Europeans have a built-in advantage. Not least, as the US is retreating inwards, and any event, did not even sign UNCLOS.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS BRUSSELS AND BERLIN

### 6.1 TENSION WITH TURKEY

The most immediate issue is the regional tension following Turkey's assertiveness in the past few months. All European institutions should support the German-led (or any other) mediation efforts. As much of the Turkish agenda goes well beyond the specific dispute with Greece and Cyprus, there are multiple issues and levers the Europeans could use. In this context, all frameworks discussed above: NATO's Mediterranean dialogue, the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership program, and the East-Med Gas forum should include discussions about the current tensions with Turkey and ideas about its resolution. A

long-term vision would be to include Turkey in the East-Med Gas forum.

## 6.2 THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE

Both Europeans and Israelis are facing the challenge of a more assertive Russia. In Europe, the Russians are assertive in their immediate environment, and in attacking opposition figures that reside abroad. They are probably also intervening in internal political affairs in Western countries. Russia has also been active in the Eastern Mediterranean, indeed mostly with its military deployment in Syria and near its shores. Although Israel maintains open lines of communications with the Russians, Moscow's presence in the region surely constrains Israel's freedom of action. The joint challenge can create a greater space of exchange of ideas, best practices, and potentially policy coordination between Israel and European actors.

## 6.3 ISRAEL-LEBANESE CONFLICT

European actors should support and create new frameworks for resolving the Israeli-Lebanese dispute over their maritime boundary. The disaster in Beirut in August 2020 and the country's dire economic situation, create an opportunity structure to bring the two nations closer on the issue. A resolution of the problem will allow international corporations to prospect in Lebanese waters and perhaps add a natural resource asset to the struggling nation. The efforts to resolve the issue are led by the US, but Europeans could initiate track two possibilities, or analysis (though think tanks) that could offer ideas to resolve the matter. The fall 2020 challenges following the unsuccessful direct talks, serve as a further reminder regarding the possible role of the Europeans in resolving the conflict. A more specific initiative could be to ask Lebanon to cancel its piece of legislation that prohibits its citizens to engage Israelis. This has been a major block to track two or any other forums that would allow dialogue between citizens of both countries.

## 6.4 SUPPORT REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

As noted, an apparent Israeli interest is to be part of regional organizations. This, due to their substantial role in regulating and coordinating aspects of the joint space, as well as the legitimacy they are understood in Israel to confer. On a deeper level, they offer Israel the potential to solve its unclear identity as a non-Arab state in an almost exclusively Arab space of the Middle -East. While focused on natural gas, the East-Med Gas Forum organization has the potential to expand its agenda, in part, as political stability is a prerequisite for full utilization of this natural asset. Indeed, its September 2020 statute commits it to support regional stability. The organization could further expand and include other states, most notably Turkey. The EU - which is mentioned favorably in the statute - can play an important role in assisting this development, not least, because it too, began as a resource-related coordination mechanism and market between old foes, but was able to expand and evolve into a supra-national entity.

## 6.5 SUPPORT FOR NORMS-BASED FRAMEWORKS

Current challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean create promising conditions for the advancement of norms-based frameworks for regional coordination. As the space between most actors in the Mediterranean sea, the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) is an easy and useful framework. Even states that did not sign it, such as Israel, largely accept it as customary international law. The EU, as a norms-based entity, could assist in supporting the region's adoption of international law instruments through training for elites, and assisting projects that will promote this approach.

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ISBN 978-965-91802-3-3



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