



Cyprus, Greece, and Israel Chart a Common Path

By **Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos** June 10, 2018



Benjamin Netanyahu, Nicos Anastasiades, and Alexis Tsipras at fourth Cyprus-Greece-Israel summit, photo via Twitter account of Alexis Tsipras

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Cyprus, Greece, and Israel are steadily building a democratic geopolitical bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean. They are exploring ways to collaborate in fields ranging from energy to communication technology and defense. Greek-American and American-Jewish communities are exploiting the momentum to further boost the

developing “triangle” and encourage US support. However, despite progress among the governments and the generally positive climate, warning signs of anti-Semitism in Greece underline the need for grassroots action to combine political achievements with wide public support.

The fourth Cyprus-Greece-Israel tripartite summit, which took place in Nicosia on May 8, 2018, made plain the determination of the three countries to deepen their cooperation. Nicos Anastasiades, Alexis Tsipras, and Benjamin Netanyahu [discussed](#) new fields of interest, including public security, cinema co-production, maritime pollution, telecommunications, and the reduction of data roaming costs. They agreed that the fifth trilateral summit will take place within the year in Beersheba, [a place described by Netanyahu as “cyber city.”](#) At that event, the parties plan to advance their dialogue on communication technologies.

At present, the countries are emphasizing their collaboration at the military level. Symbolically, [Greek fighter planes participated in an IAF aerial show](#) to celebrate Israel and the IDF’s 70th Independence Day. Also, the Chief of the Hellenic Army General Staff, Lt. Gen. Alkiviadis Stefanis, [visited Israel](#) at the invitation of Maj. Gen. Yaacov Barak, the IDF’s Ground Forces Commander, who [had already visited Greece](#) in January. According to [media reports](#), the two sides are discussing potential joint actions against new threats as well as exchange programs. [Staff talks](#) involving representatives of the armed forces of Cyprus, Greece, and Israel took place in Israel on May 9.

Energy remains at the center of attention. Cyprus and Israel currently disagree on the division of the Aphrodite reservoir, and this disagreement could lead to [international arbitration](#). To avoid such a scenario, Nicosia and Jerusalem are engaging in a “[transparent and productive dialogue](#),” as Israeli Ambassador to Cyprus Shmuel Revel put it to the Cyprus News Agency. Cypriot Energy Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypīs said companies should [first attempt to reach settlements on gas quantities on their own](#), but this process has not yet begun.

This issue is not expected to be easily solved. Lakkotrypis sees it as “one of the most important differences” between Cyprus and Israel. His Israeli counterpart Yuval Steinitz declares, “[Israel cannot give up, not even as a gesture of friendship, on its territories or its natural resources.](#)”

The lack of a sharing formula on the Aphrodite gas field does not prevent Cyprus, Israel, and Greece from examining the construction of an EastMed pipeline. Following the tripartite Nicosia summit, the Israeli ambassador to Greece, Irit Ben-Abba, spoke about a [fast rhythm for the potential realization of this “adventurous project.”](#)

An EastMed pipeline would cost more than a pipeline connecting Israel to Turkey, but would enhance security in the Eastern Mediterranean. That is why it is anathema to Ankara. Following the Nicosia meeting, the Turkish-Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci said [EastMed might not function as a route to peace](#) and advocated for the transportation of gas resources from the Levantine Basin to Europe via Turkey.

Comments like these show Ankara’s unease with the evolving cooperation among Cyprus, Greece, and Israel. The creation of a democratic bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean does not serve Turkish President’s Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman aspirations – indeed, it might disrupt them.

Executive director of the Hellenic American Leadership Council (HALC) Endy Zemenides [said in an interview](#) that his organization and the American Jewish Community (AJC) were coordinating an advocacy campaign in Washington to strengthen the Cyprus-Greece-Israel triangle with US support. A restriction on F-35 jet sales to Turkey and the end of the Cyprus Arms Embargo Act are among the goals. In May 2018 the fifth anniversary of the Congressional Hellenic-Israel Alliance [was also celebrated](#) in the US. The more Ankara’s tactics are exposed by Cyprus, Israel, and Greece, the more the international community becomes aware of Erdoğan’s motivations.

The fourth Cyprus-Greece-Israel tripartite summit took place on the same day US President Donald Trump made his Iran speech. This led both Cyprus and Greece to take a public position

on how they view Israel's sensitivity towards the Iranian threat – despite their need to align their policies with that of the EU. President Anastasiades [told i24NEWS](#) that he “urged Iran to pursue good relations with all of their neighbors and to respect the principle of non-interference.” Prime Minister Tsipras underlined that [he shared Prime Minister's Netanyahu's concern](#) but advocated for the preservation of the Iran nuclear deal. Greek companies, like Hellenic Petroleum, that are importing oil from Iran are [reportedly coming up with alternative plans](#).

Notwithstanding the strong momentum and high level of political support for the strengthening of the Cyprus-Greece-Israel geopolitical alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean, old stereotypes and prejudices are undermining wider acceptance. Worryingly, signs of anti-Semitism are resurfacing, at least in Greece. [A Greek cartoonist](#) recently compared the situation in the Gaza Strip with the Holocaust and drew a parallel between Israeli policies and Nazi practices. Both the Central Israel Council of Greece and the Embassy of Israel [criticized the comparison](#). However, the Greek blogosphere teems with articles calling the “targeting” of the cartoonist unfair and suggesting he was correct in condemning Israel's behavior towards the Palestinians.

Also, at the beginning of May, a Jewish cemetery in a southwestern suburb of Athens [was vandalized](#) and marble headstones damaged. The Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece [expressed its condemnation](#) of this incident and a [silent protest](#) was organized. Moreover, Islamic hatred of Jews has appeared in Greece. In Xanthi, a city in northeastern Greece, the self-proclaimed Mufti Ahmet Mete misses no opportunity to slander the Jews in his preaching, though he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment [for saying that Hitler was right to turn the Jews into soap](#).

Condemnations and protests are not sufficient to eradicate anti-Semitism. Recent warning signals indicate the need for better education and more accurate and open-minded media coverage. This is the only way the arguments of the political elites will receive public support in the long term.

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