The Letort Papers

THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN TRIANGLE AT CROSSROADS

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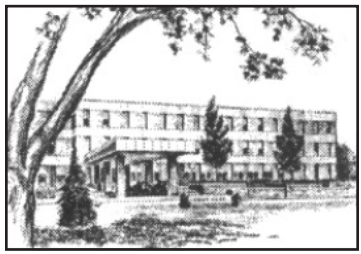

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FOREWORD

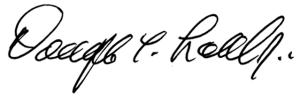
For years, the Israel-Turkey partnership was believed to be an anchor of stability in the troubled Middle East. For the United States the two regional players were supposed to pave the way to a regional system, but the collapse of their bilateral relation over the last years has put an end to these expectations. As a result of this crisis between Ankara and Jerusalem, the competition in the East Mediterranean region evolved significantly. Whereas Turkey increased its inflammatory rhetoric against Israel, the latter counterbalanced Turkey's position by strengthening ties with two rivals of Ankara: Greece and Cyprus.

As Jean-Loup Samaan explains in this Letort Paper, these power plays have major ramifications. The perilous zero-sum game which is taking place in the Mediterranean impacts bilateral relations between all the stakeholders, not only at the military but at the economic level as well. It also jeopardizes the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) policies in the region, whether inside the alliance with Greece and Turkey, or through its partnership with Israel.

But more importantly, all these countries are U.S. allies and their disputes put the American government in a delicate position, trying not to antagonize any of its partners while assuring each of them of its solidarity. Defining U.S. long-term foreign and defense policy in the Mediterranean will therefore demand a precise appraisal of the evolving power plays in an area which remains a critical region for American national security interests. Based on in-depth research and interviews conducted in the region, Jean-Loup Samaan's monograph provides us with an up-to-date evaluation of the geopolitics of the East

Mediterranean which will be beneficial not only for scholars but also for the U.S. defense community.

For this reason, the Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph on the East Mediterranean Triangle and the manner in which it can impact U.S. national security interests.



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SUMMARY

The alliance system in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has significantly evolved over the last years. The rift between Israel and Turkey since 2009 led to new strategic developments. In particular, Israeli-Greek ties have grown in earnest. Authorities in Israel and Greece have signed various trade as well as security cooperation agreements. Furthermore, the discovery of natural gas reserves in the southeastern Mediterranean has prompted cooperation between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

This Israel-Greece-Cyprus initiative has logically triggered strong opposition from Turkey, which does not recognize the government in Nicosia and objects to the claims of the Greek Cypriot Administration over the gas reserves in the south of the island. Ankara responded by conducting air and sea military drills close to the area of the planned project, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu threatened that Turkey would take appropriate measures if the three countries were to go on with the project.

As a result, the East Mediterranean Triangle can now be characterized as a volatile regional system in which alliances are no longer stable blocs. This is reflected in the ambivalent games played by the three main actors. Each of them is trying to seek seemingly contradictory goals: Israel wants to restore its ties with Turkey while hedging against Ankara's policies via a rapprochement with Greece; Greece aims to strengthen its military and commercial relations with Israel, but without openly defying Turkey; Turkey still benefits from Israeli military know-how but expresses strong condemnations of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, and moreover, it dismisses the

Israeli-Greek rapprochement while it uses its Navy in the Mediterranean area as a means of coercive diplomacy against competing forces. All of this generates an odd zero-sum game: every stakeholder claims the rules of this game still apply but bypasses them.

Moreover, the competition affects the security arrangements in Europe, with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Middle East partnership being in a deadlock. The natural gas projects brought about disputes over the territorial claims in the area and in the coming years, without a diplomatic settlement, it could lead to rising naval skirmishes with gunboat diplomacy becoming a norm.

To prevent instability, the United States has to navigate between the concerns and the sensitivity of three allies. The core issue of the current troubles in the East Mediterranean Triangle remains the crisis in the Turkish-Israeli relations. As a result, the first measure to prevent further escalation in this rift is to disconnect the Turkish-Israeli file from the Greek and Cypriot cases. U.S. diplomats and officers should carefully dismiss the counterbalancing narrative behind the Israeli-Greek rapprochement. Following the same logic of prevention, the U.S. administration may address the NATO issue by making the case that the Alliance's partnership policy should not be undermined by the tensions between one member nation and a partner country. It does not mean challenging or ignoring the Turkish political agenda; otherwise, this would only bring further obstruction from Ankara. However, the scope of NATO-Israel partnership is by nature modest and should not be the issue of a fierce diplomatic fight. A second step would look at the ways to reinitiate political and diplomatic dialogue between Israel and Turkey. The United States could act as a mediator

by convening working-level meetings to discuss common areas of interest, such as the Syrian crisis and its effects on the region. Eventually, this could pave the way for a return to stability in the East Mediterranean area.

THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN TRIANGLE AT CROSSROADS

INTRODUCTION

On May 14, 2015, the Israeli, Greek, and U.S. Navies concluded a 2-week long exercise named Noble Dina. Officially, this annual trilateral naval exercise is "designed to increase interoperability by developing the individual and collective maritime proficiencies of Greece, Israel, and the U.S., while also promoting friendship, mutual understanding, and cooperation."[1] The 2015 edition was the fifth and largest one as it involved hundreds of military personnel of the three countries and nearly a dozen ships, such as Greek and Israeli submarines, the U.S. Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer Laboon (DDG 58), the Military Sealift Command fleet-replenishment oiler USNS Lenthall (T-AO 189), and P-3C Orion aircraft.[2] The scenarios driving the exercise included search and rescue missions, ship seizure, and port security operations.

It was only 5 years ago that this naval exercise did not exist, but moreover, the Israeli and the U.S. Navies were conducting a similar one with Greece's neighbor and long-time rival, Turkey. Indeed, from 1998 to 2009, Israel, Turkey, and the United States had been organizing the exercise "Reliant Mermaid." Following the 1996 agreement between Israel and Turkey for military cooperation, the two Mediterranean countries had been strengthening their ties by increasing joint defense activities. In that perspective, "Reliant Mermaid" served as a means to enhance interoperability between their navies. Moreover, for Ankara and Jerusalem, "Reliant Mermaid" was conveying a message

of resolve and deterrence to the surrounding hostile countries, namely Syria and Iran. However, Turkish participation in the exercise stopped in 2010 following the crisis over the Mavi Marmara flotilla that saw the Israeli navy opening fire on Turkish activists refusing to comply with the Gaza blockade. Soon, the Turkish-Israeli relation would turn sour, and the Israeli navy opened discussions with its Greek counterpart to organize a similar exercise, "Noble Dina."

The story of this exercise—its timing, its purpose—is not a mere anecdote. It reflects the swift and major change in power plays that the East-Mediterranean region has been experiencing over the last 5 years. As we will see in this monograph, this shift has ramifications not only in the realm of military cooperation, but also in domains such as diplomatic negotiations, commercial activities, and energy markets.

Specifically the new dynamics between Greece, Turkey, and Israel—the members of what we call here the "East Mediterranean Triangle"—have an impact on critical issues such as the negotiations over the status of Cyprus. It affects regional organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) whose Middle East partnership, the Mediterranean Dialogue, suffered from the tensions.

But as politics changed so did the business landscape. Israeli tourists to Turkey progressively migrated to Greece as well as arms sales (though Turkey remains an important client of Israeli defense companies). Moreover, the discovery of natural gas reserves in the Southeastern Mediterranean has prompted cooperation between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. Former Israeli Energy Minister Uzi Landau went as far as to speak of "an axis of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, and possibly more countries, which will offer an anchor of stability."[3]

This Israel-Greece-Cyprus initiative has logically triggered strong opposition from Turkey, which does not recognize the government in Nicosia, and objects to the claims of the Greek Cypriot Administration over the gas reserves in the south of the island. Ankara responded by conducting air and sea military drills close to the area of the planned project, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu threatened that Turkey would take appropriate measures if the three countries were to go on with the project. This has been denounced by Israel as "gunboat diplomacy."[4]

As a result, the strategic triangle in the East Mediterranean has seen its inner logic completely revised. Understanding these currents and their implications is the core objective of this monograph. In the following sections, we offer an appraisal of this regional security complex[5] that connects the on-going changes and troubles with the historical developments since the end of World War II. Indeed, it is a risky endeavor to describe the contemporary crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations without looking back at the making of these relations 60 years ago and their subsequent evolution. The same could be said of the sudden Greek-Israeli rapprochement. The historical background helps us in distinguishing between core issues and temporary skirmishes, between momentary enthusiasm and solid partnership.

To investigate our topic, we crossed different types of sources. The historical section relies mainly on two types of sources: historical declassified archives (mostly from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the U.S. government), and personal accounts of policymakers which include essays, correspondence, and memoirs. In the case of the second and third sections that cover contemporary issues, we collected informa-

tion reported by media outlets that provided us with the backdrop of the current regional landscape. These data sources were then checked and expanded via interviews with practitioners, journalists, and foreign policy experts conducted either through a series of field trips, phone calls, and emails with official representatives. As a general rule, the anonymity of all sources has been preserved.

In that context, the first section of this monograph exposes the modern emergence of the East Mediterranean Triangle in the years following World War II and after the birth of modern Israel in 1948 in particular. The next section focuses on the 2010-2015 period, during which the initial logic of the triangle unraveled and engendered a new set of relations between the three countries. In the third section, we look at three files affected by the current dynamics of the triangle: the energy prospects in the Mediterranean, the NATO partnership policy, and the rise of Israel's look-east policy. Finally, we highlight why the future of this triangle matters for the U.S. defense community vis-à-vis the stability in the region and its bilateral relations with each of the three countries.

THE MODERN EMERGENCE OF THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN TRIANGLE

To understand the inner logic of the East Mediterranean Triangle composed of Turkey, Greece, and Israel, we need to go back in history to the birth of the latter. On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel in front of the Jewish People's Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum. Greece and Turkey were not supporters of this new State in the Mediterranean. Athens had voted

against the United Nations (UN) Palestine partition plan in November 1947 and refused to recognize de jure Israel in 1949. For scholar Amikam Nachmani, "When the war ended, Greece surpassed even Egypt in its hostility toward Israel."[6] Eventually consular relations were established in 1952, but both countries would look at each other with great suspicion. According to Israeli diplomatic archives, cables sent from Athens explicitly identified Greece as "an enemy of Israel."[7]

Turkey also voted against the UN partition plan of 1947, but it would act differently from Greece in the following years. In March 1949, it became the first Muslim country to recognize de facto Israel. In March of the following year, diplomatic relations were established at the level of legation with a Minister Plenipotentiary appointed to Tel Aviv and an Israeli legation similarly established in Ankara. This step logically triggered public condemnations of Turkey by Arab countries invoking the shattered Islamic solidarity against the Zionist project.[8] But at that moment, the Turkish government of Adnan Menderes, elected in 1950, had different priorities. It aimed not to strengthen Turkish-Arab relations but to integrate the country into the Western sphere. This succeeded on February 18, 1952, with Turkey becoming a member of the young North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (along with Greece that joined the same day). To evidence the new ties with Ankara, the government in Jerusalem soon aligned itself to the Turkish policy on Cyprus. This marked the beginning of a strategic triangle in the area: over the coming years the governments of the three countries internalized the security priorities of the others, and a zero-sum game between the players became the primary rule.

Cyprus was to be the litmus test of that zero-sum game. When in June 1878, the Ottoman Empire had ceded the island of Cyprus to the United Kingdom to make it a protectorate, the local population was primarily Orthodox, and the Muslims were a minority. In 1925, Cyprus formally became a colony of the Commonwealth, and in the following years, the Orthodox community built a strong national identity under Greece's influence. Eventually, they started claiming the union of Cyprus (*enossis*) with Greece. But by the 1950s, the strategic environment had dramatically changed. The Turkish government of Adnan Menderes saw the island as an extension of Anatolia and opposed the *enossis* movement. Soon a diplomatic crisis emerged as Ankara demanded the sustainment of the current status quo while the Greek government advocated for the union. While Greek Cypriots intensified their nationalist claims, Turkish Cypriots felt oppressed and both communities engaged in communitarian fighting.

Although Israel was initially supportive of diplomatic ties with Cyprus, it soon aligned itself with Ankara's position. Not only was the Turkish-Israeli relation a priority, but Cypriot independentists were receiving arms from Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.[9] This Israeli position on Cyprus led to a softer posture of the Turkish delegation at the UN on the Israeli-Arab dispute.[10] As a result, it also deepened the level of distrust between Israel and Greece.

However, the Suez War of 1956 would lead to a halt in the steady rapprochement between Ankara and Jerusalem. On October 29 of that year, Israeli armed forces attacked the Egyptians and pushed toward the Suez Canal that had been nationalized 3 months before. The Israelis were joined 2 days later by the Brit-

ish and French forces. However, soon this campaign was condemned by both the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States with threats of economic sanctions from Washington addressed to the three nations. These latter eventually withdrew (the French and British by December 1956, the Israelis by March 1957).

The war had a direct impact on Israel-Turkey relations. The pressure from Arab partners was such that Ankara scaled down its diplomatic mission to Israel and recalled its Minister, Sevket Istinyeli. On November 26, 1956, a month after Israel invaded Egypt, the Turkish government issued a statement that it "has decided to recall its Minister in Tel Aviv, who will not return until a just and final solution of the Palestine question has been achieved."[11] Egyptian President Nasser, who was by then at the peak of his popularity in the Arab world, was at the forefront of that call on the Turkish government.

This shift in Turkey's orientation would prove the relevance of one fundamental driver of its policy toward Israel: the Arab factor. It would take a year before Ankara resumed its relations with Jerusalem and that was largely the result of the Turkish calculus vis-à-vis the developments in the Arab world: first, the increasing ties between neighboring Syria and the USSR, and second the 1958 coup in Iraq. Along with Turkey and Pakistan, the Iraqi monarchy had been a member of the Baghdad Pact which aimed at anchoring a Western-oriented alliance in the region. The coup, led by Abdul Salam Arif and Abd al-Karim Qasim, took the White House and the intelligence community by surprise. They later came to believe that the Egyptian ruler, Nasser, was behind the revolution.[12] With this regime change in Iraq occurring at the same time as the

United Arab Republic was being established between Egypt and Syria, pan-Arabism had gained a momentum in the region that was engendering fear among the non-Arab countries in the Middle East. Turks and Israelis both feared that Nasser's delusions of regional hegemony would drive his pan-Arabist agenda. In addition, the U.S.-USSR competition also played a significant role as both Turkey and Israel were eager to be part of the Western side.

In Israel this triggered the making, by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, of a foreign policy strategy, coined "the alliance of the periphery," that would seek to counterbalance Arab foes by strengthening military ties with non-Arab countries in the Middle East. Along with the Shah's Iran and Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, Turkey was to become a new primary partner. Only a few days after the Iraqi crisis, Ben-Gurion wrote to U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower to detail this new grand strategy:

> With the purpose of erecting a high dam against the Nasserist-Soviet tidal wave, we have begun tightening our links with several states on the outside of the perimeter of the Middle East—Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia....Our goal is to organize a group of countries, not necessarily an official alliance, that will be able to stand strong against Soviet expansion by proxy through Nasser, and which might save Lebanon's freedom, and maybe in time, Syria's.[13]

Contrary to the Baghdad Pact, the alliance of the periphery was to remain a secret enterprise relying mostly on military and intelligence exchanges. Additionally, it was from the outset an Israeli strategy and remained so: it never reached the level of a robust multilateral, regional alliance, and stayed at the level

of bilateral relations between Israel and the three other countries. The U.S. government played an instrumental part to support the initiative by encouraging the decisionmakers in Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia to join Ben-Gurion's project. A new step was reached on August 29, 1958, when Ben-Gurion visited Ankara to meet his counterpart Adnan Menderes. The content of their talks still remains a topic of controversy to this day. Turkish officials downplay the importance of the event and describe the meeting as a mere recognition of mutual interests without a binding written statement. However, Sezai Orkunt, head of Turkey's military intelligence from 1964 to 1968, declared that there was an agreement concluded but that its content was made known only to a dozen of civilian and military policymakers inside the Turkish government.[14] These contradictory views illustrate what soon became the rule of Israel-Turkey relations: ambiguity, extreme caution, and, if necessary, opposite statements to preserve the clandestine character of the cooperation. In 1959, the head of the Israeli legation in Turkey even qualified the relation with Ankara as "love outside marriage."[15] Likewise, scholar Noa Schonmann refers to this diplomatic style as a "mistress syndrome" on the side of Turkey. There has been substantial evidence that trilateral cooperation between Israel, Iran, and Turkey existed, and involved heads of military intelligence under the auspices of an organization called Trident.[16]

In 1960, the new regime of General Cemal Gürsel replaced Menderes but did not revoke the ties with Israel. These ties would even get strengthened as it progressively appeared that in Ankara the most important supporters of the cooperation were the armed forces. Turkish generals saw the exchange with Israeli intelligence as extremely valuable for monitoring the

developments in Syria, while the possibility to improve the readiness of its soldiers via training events with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was perceived beneficial. By 1959, according to Tel Aviv-based scholar Ofra Bengio, both Israeli and Turkish armies had worked together on "a joint strategic plan for a war against Syria (and possibly against another Arab country)."[17] Additionally, the Israeli Air Force was given permission to train on Turkish territory. Given the narrowness of Israel's territory and its absence of strategic depth, this possibility was crucial.

But soon, Gürsel realized that getting closer to Israel had a major prize. In Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi announced his public recognition of Israel, a gesture that led to fierce reactions in the Arab world and dramatic consequences, such as the deterioration of Arab-Iranian diplomatic relations. Gürsel was not keen on antagonizing the Arab rulers, nor was his successor Ismet Inönü. As a result, political exchanges remained discreet, if not secret, while economic cooperation—usually perceived as less sensitive—grew in earnest. While entrepreneurs in both countries were getting enthusiastic, Turkish politicians remained cautious and Israeli counterparts became frustrated.

Meanwhile, by 1963, the issue of Cyprus had escalated with open confrontation between the Greek and Turkish communities. Witnessing the imbalance between the Greeks and the Turkish minority, Ankara decided to intervene by bombing Nicosia and threatened a full military intervention. The government of Inönü believed the West, in particular the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States, had abandoned the Turkish community of Cyprus and, as a consequence, Ankara sought for new allies that could help support its views at the UN general assembly. Eventually, this led Turkey to reconsider its priorities regard-

ing the Arab-Israeli dispute: it needed the diplomatic leverage that Arab countries could provide on the Cyprus issue but, to that aim, it had to accommodate Arab demands on distancing itself from Israel. Furthermore, Israel was also playing a delicate game during the 1964 Cypriot crisis that infuriated the Turkish officials. Jerusalem did not want to endorse Turkish bombardment and expressed concerns for the humanitarian disaster on the island. The result was that the Turkish-Israeli momentum gained after 1958 came to a halt. Arab-Turkish relations were getting stronger in terms of trade, diplomatic visits, and media coverage. Significantly, Turkey, which had not been vocal before on the Palestinian issue, suddenly expressed its concerns for the refugees.

Still, it is important to underline that the end of the 1958 momentum did not mean a complete dismantlement of Turkish-Israeli relations: intelligence cooperation continued, and Israeli fighter aircraft kept flying over the Turkish airspace. Ankara refrained from reaching the point to normalization. It kept the relations in a cloud of opacity but assessed at the same time that secret military and intelligence ties were valuable.

During that period, Israel-Greece relations remained extremely low. In the 70s and 80s, anti-Israeli rhetoric in the political landscape in Athens was common. For instance, in 1983, Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, the socialist leader of Greece, described the Israeli intervention in Lebanon as "nazi" and "fascist."[18] The Arab factor also played a major role in the Greek calculus: Athens feared that a rapprochement with Jerusalem would antagonize Egypt and lead to economic and physical pressures on the Greek community in the country. Additionally, the shipping industry in Greece, a key source of the national reve-

nues, relied heavily on the Arab States, thereby making cooperation with Israel detrimental to the whole economy.

Eventually, Greece established full diplomatic relations with Israel, but that occurred only by 1990. In the years following the end of the Cold War, Greek-Israeli relations were moving ahead. Turkish leadership was also reassessing its strategy of distancing itself from Jerusalem. The 1990s were a new period marked by the optimism borne out of the Oslo Process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. As Jordan signed a peace treaty recognizing the existence of Israel in 1994, while at the same time pursuing a negotiation track with Syria, there were high expectations for normalization with the Hebrew State. As a result, the Turkish equation changed from the one of the 1960s. Under these conditions, cooperating with Israel would not antagonize the Arab States. The Oslo Agreement was signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in September 1993. Only 2 months later, the Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin was traveling to Jerusalem. Exchanges between the two countries would be governed by a Security and Secrecy Agreement signed on May 31, 1994. However, despite the Oslo mindset in the Middle East, the agreement indicated the willingness not to share all the information regarding the extent of the new cooperation. In other words, the opacity of the 1950s was still the rule.

This first meeting led to full diplomatic relations and a series of ministerial visits. In October 1994, again only 9 days after the signing of Jordan-Israel peace agreements, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller traveled to Israel, which was the first-ever visit to the country by a Turkish head of government.[19]

During this important period when both countries were discussing strategic cooperation, it is important to distinguish Turkey's views on the Israel-Jordan peace agreements from the Israel-Syria negotiations. Syria and Turkey were hostile States at that point, with Syrian ruler Hafez al-Assad harboring the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), which was considered a terrorist organization by Ankara. If the Oslo Process and Jordan's recognition of Israel were seen as factors easing the cooperation with Israel, the negotiations with Syria were considered with more suspicion by the Turks. In that perspective, the rapprochement with Israel was understood more as an insurance policy or a counterbalance measure vis-à-vis Syria. Adding to the complexity of the triangle, Assad's Syria was in urgent need for new allies after the collapse of the USSR, and it had been turning to countries that were antagonists of Turkey: Greece and Armenia.

In February 1996, a strategic agreement was signed between Ankara and Jerusalem: diplomatic relations were by then at full pace, as military cooperation intensified and bilateral trade bloomed. It is noteworthy that in both countries the driving forces behind the agreement were not the ministries of foreign affairs but the armed forces. As explained by one Israeli retired defense official interviewed, it was the ministry of defense in Tel Aviv that initiated the talks with Ankara without requesting approval from the diplomats based in Jerusalem.[20] On the Turkish side, the military had been a historical supporter of the cooperation, which it saw as a way to modernize its forces. The 1996 agreement was, therefore, the result of the military leadership in Ankara. It was also made possible because, on the civilian side, political parties had started downgrading their usual anti-Israeli rhetoric following the Oslo Process.

In the next years, defense trade became a crucial component of the bilateral relation. Israeli defense industry modernized the Turkish fleet of F-4 Phantoms and its M-60 tanks. Ankara also started buying various sophisticated weapons systems. All in all, there was the feeling of a honeymoon between the two countries. "For Jerusalem, the intimacy between the two governments was second only to US-Israel relations,"wrote Efraim Inbar, professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University.[21]

At that time, Israel-Greece relations also looked promising with a military agreement signed in 1994. It seemed for a short period of time as if the regional mindset of a zero-sum game had vanished. However, 2 years later, after the agreement with Turkey had been made public, when Foreign Minister Shimon Peres tried in vain to relaunch the perspective of defense cooperation with the Greeks: Athens refused and political leaders started expressing their discontent concerning the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement.[22] It was a clear reminder that the zero-sum game still prevailed in the East Mediterranean.

By the beginning of the 21st century, after nearly 5 decades, the East Mediterranean triangle seemed to be reaching a new step. Although the Cypriot issue was far from being solved, the tensions between Greece and Turkey were lowering while the peace process in the Middle East made a partnership with Israel possible. Political stability and economic prosperity were in the air. But soon the new setting of the triangle established during the 1990s was to experience troubles that would again lead to a reshuffling.

THE UNRAVELLING OF THE TRIANGLE

By the end of 2001, with the second Intifada erupting, the election of Ariel Sharon in Israel and the 9/11 attacks in the United States had caused the hopes of a peace process in the Middle East to all but disappear. On November 3, 2002, the Justice and Development Party (in Turkish *dalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* abbreviated AKP) won the general elections in Turkey and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was nominated Prime Minister. Created only a year before the election, AKP was in itself a revolution in Turkish politics. Although its foundations were to be found in Islamism, it claimed to be a center-right wing formation that would not challenge the country's traditional secularism. Erdoğan's rhetoric combined conservatism and liberalism and his followers presented themselves as "conservative democrats."[23] Although the Israelis were initially worried that the AKP challenged the basis of the bilateral relations, the new government in Ankara did not do so in its first years. The military cooperation continued, the trade kept rising, and Erdoğan visited Israel in May 2005. At the same time, Turkey was ambitiously redesigning its foreign policy under the supervision of the chief advisor to Erdoğan, Ahmet Davutoğlu. A former scholar, Davutoğlu had written a seminal book *Strategic Depth* in 2001, which aimed to provide a new roadmap for future Turkish governments. Using the German concept of *lebensraum* (literally "living space"), he argued that Turkey's geopolitical destiny was to dominate a sphere of influence encompassing the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus.[24]

In the following years, when Davutoğlu would become foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister, he applied this theory to Turkey's regional relations. Spe-

cifically, Davutoğlu and Erdoğan believed in the idea of a "zero-problem neighborhood policy" that would allow the country to cultivate ties with all countries in its vicinity without ideological limitations. In other words, Ankara would no longer constrain itself by a dilemma between the West and the East, and it would become the center of gravity, the junction of the two worlds. Such a grand strategy was surely ambitious, but it negated the traditional logic of the zero-sum game in the Middle East, according to which the Turkish-Israeli alliance had been built. Soon Jerusalem observed worryingly the consequences of the new Turkish foreign policy as it started a process of rapprochement with two hostile neighbors: Syria and Iran.

Turkish-Iranian cooperation grew in earnest in 2004, when both countries signed an agreement on security cooperation, with a particular emphasis on counterterrorism, border security, and intelligence sharing. Energy ties also expanded, as in July 2007, Turkey and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding to transport 30 billion cubic meters of Iranian and Turkmen natural gas to Europe. The deal foresaw the construction of two separate pipelines to ship gas from Iranian and Turkmen gas fields. Despite the strong criticisms of the deal by the U.S. government, the project is still active today.

Meanwhile, the Turkey-Syria reconciliation that developed all through the 2000s was epitomized in 2009 by a 3-day military maneuver involving ground forces of both countries. It evidenced the new level of cooperation between Ankara and Damascus, confirmed a month later by Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit to Syria. The improvement of both bilateral relations was to symbolize Davutoğlu's principle of "zero-problem neighborhood policy."

This new Turkish foreign policy was soon portrayed as a case of "neo-ottomanism." Arabic newspapers widely portrayed Davutoğlu as the official "architect of new ottomanism,"and in some cases have been using false quotes in which Davutoğlu allegedly claimed to be a "neo-Ottoman." Despite the Turkish foreign minister's public denial, this vision persisted.[25] This terminology of "new ottomans" or "neo-ottomanism" blurred more than it enlightened Turkish policies. It engendered many controversies and misunderstandings for the observers of Turkish politics that sometimes over exaggerated the Erdoğan enterprise in the Middle East, as well as his means to implement it.[26]

But what was Israel's role in this scheme? In Davutoğlu's original vision, the country was explicitly defined as an artificial creation, "a geopolitical tumour," and "a state that is politically foreign to that geography."[27] Although Jerusalem was expressing concerns, the Turkish government also started engaging with the Palestinian movement Hamas, considered a terrorist organization by Israel, by hosting a delegation of their representatives in January 2006.

But in spite of this backdrop, the Turkish-Israeli relation did not yet deteriorate. It is only by the end of the 2000s that the AKP government started to demonstrate its discontent over the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. In particular, the IDF operation "Cast Lead" targeting Hamas in the Gaza Strip which started on December 27, 2008, provoked a rift that eventually would tear the relation apart. Prime Minister Erdoğan was said to take as an offense the fact that the Israeli government neither shared information nor consulted him prior to the attack.[28] Additionally, the scale of the attack engendered a massive outrage in the Arab

world, a phenomenon that the Turkish leader could not ignore as he was working on improving Ankara's relations with Arab countries. After all, the zero-sum game logic still existed.

This led to Erdoğan's condemnation of Israel's "Cast Lead" operation during one of the plenary sessions of the Davos Summit right in front of Israeli President Shimon Peres, on January 29, 2009. This turned the Turkish Prime Minister into a hero in Arab countries. In the following months, the more the Israel-Turkey tensions unraveled, the more positive Turkey's image became in the Arab world.[29] In addition, the rapprochement between Erdoğan's Turkey and Palestinian Hamas in Gaza, along with the preservation of close relations with the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah), allowed Ankara to play the role of mediator between Palestinian factions.[30] Consequently, by the end of 2010, the debate in the opinion pages of the leading Arabic newspapers was not whether Turkey had new imperialistic ambitions, but which similarities could be seen between Erdoğan and President Nasser, the Egyptian ruler and perennial figure of Arab nationalism.[31]

On the Israeli front, the first consequences were felt in the decrease of high-level visits and the inflation of anti-Israeli rhetoric in Turkish politics. Events unfolded as a series of escalating accidents. In September 2009, while traveling to Israel, Ahmet Davutoğlu, by then Foreign Minister, was refused access to the Gaza Strip by Israeli authorities. In reaction, Turkey canceled the participation of the Israeli Air Force to the military exercise "Anatolian Eagle" in October of the same year. The year 2010 deepened the bilateral crisis. Military exchanges were significantly diminished, and in the spring, Israeli officials publicly expressed con-

cerns over the nomination of Hakan Fidan as Head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization. A close friend of Erdoğan, Fidan was seen as a pro-Iranian figure by the Israelis. According to that view, his alleged agenda would compromise intelligence exchanges with Tel Aviv.[32] Several officials from the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv described Fidan to us as "the man of Tehran in Ankara."[33] "He is the person who sold Israel's secrets to the Iranians," Israeli intelligence officials said of Fidan to the newspaper *Haaretz*.[34] Later on, the Israelis also believed that Fidan played an instrumental role in a clash that has left scars on the Turkish-Israeli relations to this day: the Mavi Marmara incident.

The Mavi Marmara was a passenger ship bought by the Turkish non-governmental organization (NGO) Humanitarian Relief Foundation in 2010 which intended to defy the Israeli blockade over Gaza in May 2010. While in international waters, the "freedom flotilla" composed of six ships was asked by Israeli Naval Forces to divert its trajectory to Ashdod Port, but the flotilla declined and was boarded in international waters. Activists and Israeli commandos engaged in a violent clash that led to the death of nine NGO members and the injuring of 10 Israeli soldiers. Although a cloud of controversy surrounded the action of the Mavi Marmara flotilla, Israel argued that the IDF intervention was legal in that the ship was not containing any humanitarian aid. This triggered an uproar in public opinion all around the world. Eventually, it became the point of no return between Turkey and Israel, or at least according to the perceptions of diplomats on both sides. Starting in the following weeks, political dialogue between both countries ceased with Israel's government refusing to apologize for the clash over the Turkish flotilla, and the authorities of Tur-

key blocking not only bilateral cooperation but Israel-NATO cooperation as well, as we will see later in the monograph.

Then in early-2013, after 3 years of deterioration, Israeli diplomats were hoping to restore the ties: several high-level meetings had taken place, including the heads of intelligence in Cairo. In a carefully theatrical phone call, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conveyed his apologies to Erdoğan over the loss of lives in the Mavi Marmara raid. The Turkish leader accepted them, and an initial agreement was reached on compensation. Expectations were high in Jerusalem, and observers believed that Turkey was by now revamping its Middle Eastern policy against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis. Indeed, supporting the revolution against the Syrian ruler, Turkey's assertiveness was progressively seen as an ill-advised and perilous escalation of the conflict. In particular, Turkey's support for the rebels, including fringes among them that were identified as extremist factions (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra) led many to wonder what exactly the objective driving Ankara's policy was in the Syrian civil war.[35]

Notwithstanding this small window of opportunity, the relation between Ankara and Jerusalem got worse, not better. In the summer of 2013, Erdoğan accused Israel of being involved in the military coup that ousted former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. Despite the implementation of compensation by the Israelis, the Turkish leadership kept repeating its strong aversion for Israel and Zionism which the Prime Minister even described as a "crime against humanity."[36] By the first months of 2015, when we returned to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for a new series of interviews, our interlocutors were no longer expecting anything. A

consensus had emerged within the military and the diplomatic corps that Turkey, at least under the reign of the AKP, was not interested in restoring ties with Israel. The rift was not only affecting the level of political leadership, but the working level of diplomats and officers who were exchanging only on an ad hoc, informal basis. Arms sales were slowing down, and progressively fears of anti-Semitic attitudes in Turkey were leading Israeli tourists to avoid Turkey as a destination. If in 2013 government insiders were still optimistic, they had completely become disillusioned 2 years later. It is in this specific context that Israel-Greece relations have been improved.

It all started through military exchanges. Between May 28 to June 12, 2008, an exercise between the two national air forces called Glorious Spartan took place. It conveyed the first signal that the long dormant military agreement between both countries—the agreement that had been signed a decade earlier but which never got implemented—could after all be active. A year later, the relation upgraded to the political echelon. A meeting was held on October 15, 2009, in Athens between Greek and Israeli political insiders. They discussed the opportunity of strengthening the bilateral ties. The participants included advisors close to George Papandreou, who had been elected Greek Prime Minister a week earlier, and the gathering was called, according to Aristotle Tziampiris, "the Electra group" in reference to the Electra Hotel in Athens where discussions took place.[37] This informal network of like-minded advisors promoted the rapprochement to their respective leaders.

A new step was reached in February 2010 when Papandreou and Netanyahu met in Moscow. Both heads of government happened to be visiting Russia

at the same time, so a meeting was shortly arranged at Moscow's Cafe Pushkin on February 16, 2010, during which the two prime ministers discussed rather openly about their foreign policy challenges.[38] The Cafe Pushkin meeting would be the starting point of an intense exchange between the two governments. It was then followed by various official high-level visits at the level of presidents, prime ministers, and defense ministers. In July 2010, Papandreou visited Jerusalem, and Netanyahu traveled to Athens only a month later. As a result, a new cooperation memorandum was signed. It widely expanded previous documents as various fields of common interest were now on the table: security exchanges, tourism, and energy projects. The following year, Israel Defense Minister Ehud Barak and his Greek counterpart, Panos Beglitis, went further by passing a security cooperation agreement. Meanwhile, the Greek parliament approved the purchase of Israeli bomb-precision upgrade kits, which cost $155 million for 400 systems.

Between 2010 and 2012, no less than 13 joint Greek-Israeli military exercises had been conducted: among others, Minoas, Caya Green, Aegean Seal, Noble Dina, Passex, and Turning Point.[39]

The Israel-Greece rapprochement is not only visible in the military realm but also in other sectors such as tourism, culture, education and trade. Prior to the Papandreou visit of 2010, there were around 150,000 Israeli tourists coming to Greece each year. For 2012, they were estimated to reach 400,000.

Witnessing the rise of the bilateral relation, Greek President Karolos Papoulis visited Israel on July 10, 2011. During one interview there, he expressed his view on this recent rapprochement:

> Greece and Israel have rich and diverse ties. . . . Our Ministers and officials systematically consult and work together on all levels and in key areas: energy, defense and security, agriculture, tourism. . . . We are pursuing a strong relationship—strong on trade, strong on investment, strong on political, and security cooperation.[40]

On the other side, Israel also conveyed the message that the relation had never been so high. Israeli Ambassador to Greece, Aryeh Mekel, explained to the online media, *Al-Monitor:*

> Greek-Israel relations today are at an unprecedented peak. In the last three years, the relationship has undergone a dramatic changeover due to the decision of the two countries to open a new page and maintain long-term strategic cooperation without connection to relations with other countries.[41]

The last specification from Mekel is worth underlining and challenging: is this rapprochement really without any connection to relations with other countries?

True, the Israelis and the Greeks emphasize that cooperation did not come out of the blue in 2010, that the first bilateral economic agreement was written in 1992, and the first military agreement in 1994 — in fact before the one between Israel and Turkey.

Still, the timing of the rapprochement coincides a bit too much with the widening gap between Israel and Turkey. This is why Turkish leaders have been obviously scrutinizing these developments. Military exercises engendered low-level tensions in the Mediterranean when, at times, the Turkish Navy would conduct maneuvers near Cyprus at the same time as the joint Israeli-Greek exercises.[42] However, off the

record, Turkish officials tend to dismiss their concerns, downplaying the strategic significance of this Israeli-Greek rapprochement. One diplomat sarcastically told us, "If Israel wants to counterbalance Turkey with a country in profound economic and political troubles like Greece, we [the Turks] should not be worried, the Israelis should!"[43]

Israeli officers and diplomats do not hide this strategic fact: Greece is no substitute for Turkey. It has neither the geopolitical reach nor the military might of the historical ally of Israel. Not only is Greece enduring a financial crisis that is eroding its military capabilities, but it never had the type of leverage Turkey enjoys in the Middle East and that Israel crucially needs today. But as one diplomat formerly assigned in Ankara states, "Greece allows us to avoid complete isolation in the Mediterranean. Look at the current state of our neighbors: Syria, Lebanon, Egypt. Desperate times call for desperate measures."[44]

If the rapprochement with Greece does not exactly look like Israel countering Turkey, it could, at least, be depicted as a hedge against Turkish diplomatic reorientation. Still, the persistent view in the region is that the logic behind the honeymoon between Jerusalem and Athens is "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." This is not without embarrassment for the Greeks and the Israelis who want to see more than bitter politics in the rapprochement. In fact, it is in the interest of neither Greece nor Israel to confine their rapprochement to a move to counterbalance Turkey.

Athens is not keen on using its Israeli policy to antagonize Ankara as recent Greek prime ministers have committed their country to the enhancement of the relationship with its historical rival, in particular in the field of bilateral trade.

As a result, the East Mediterranean Triangle can now be characterized as a volatile regional system in which alliances are no longer stable blocs. This is reflected in the ambivalent games played by the three main actors. Each of them is trying to seek seemingly contradictory goals: Israel wants to restore its ties with Turkey while hedging against Ankara's policies *via* a rapprochement with Greece; Greece aims to strengthen its military and commercial relations with Israel, but without openly defying Turkey; Turkey still benefits from Israeli military know-how but expresses strong condemnations of the Netanyahu government, and moreover, it dismisses the Israeli-Greek rapprochement while it uses its navy in the Mediterranean area as a means of coercive diplomacy against competing forces. All of this generates an odd zero-sum game: every stakeholder claims the rules of this game still apply but bypasses them.

This volatility is exacerbated by the deep personalization of the relations between the three countries. There is a widely shared view in Israel and Turkey that the low level of cooperation between the two governments is first and foremost a result of the difficult relation between their leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Benjamin Netanyahu. However, on the other hand, it could be argued that historically, given the huge sensitivity of the matter, Turkish-Israeli cooperation was only made possible because of decisions at the highest level. Personal relations between leaders always mattered: after all, one reason Ben-Gurion was supportive of a partnership with Turkey was because he had lived in Istanbul and was a great admirer of the first president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Moreover, the Arab factor that played a role over the last years is nothing new. We have seen that the

Suez War, or later Nasser's pressures on Ankara, affected the Israeli-Turkish relation. In a sense, the 1990s made observers forget the importance of the Arab factor because of the optimism borne out of the Oslo Process and the momentum it engendered in the region.

Regarding Greece, there was important apprehension in Israel regarding the electoral victory of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) party in January 2015, which led Alexis Tsipras to become the Prime Minister. Israeli diplomats feared that the left-wing platform conducted by Tsipras would not see the rapprochement with Israel as a priority or even as a valuable asset. But paradoxically, over the last 5 years, Greek governments have been more unstable than those of Turkey and Israel, but they have shown continuity on the issue of relations with Jerusalem, something that Aristotle Tziampiris describes as a kind of "papandreouism without Papandreou."[45]

Eventually, the volatility of the triangle makes the future of the East Mediterranean region hardly predictable, in particular because it will primarily depend on the domestic politics of the three countries.

THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Having portrayed the history and the current state of the strategic triangle, we can now look at three domains in which its evolution will have important consequences: the rising power plays in the Mediterranean regarding the discovery of significant gas reserves; the consequences of the tensions between Turkey and Israel on NATO policies; and the changing foreign policy of Israel vis-à-vis these developments within Europe.

Since late-2011, the rapprochement between Jerusalem and Athens is not only driven by military goals, but also by economic prospects borne out of the discovery of natural gas reserves in the East Mediterranean. A geological study in 2010 showed that the Levantine area could hold as much as 122 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas.[46] So far, Israeli companies have been the most advanced in preparing to extract gas from its exclusive economic zones. There, a consortium led by the American firm Noble Energy, composed of Israeli firms Delek and Avner Oil, have worked on the resources of two major gas fields, Leviathan and Tamar. Initially there were also high speculations regarding the gas field Aphrodite in Cyprus's exclusive economic zone, but as of 2015, exploration proved less promising than expected.[47]

Still the discovery of these reserves has generated a new area of cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel in terms of gas export projects. Israeli companies like Noble and Delek have been working closely with Greece and Cyprus in the extraction of other energy supplies. The project involves Israel and Cyprus creating a gas pipeline, and an LNG terminal with the gas being brought from there to Europe via Greece.[48] This option could be an attractive one for European countries eager to find an alternative to the Gazprom supply if relations with Russia worsen—one-third of European imports come from Russia as of 2015. As a result, Israeli Energy Minister Uzi Landau stated in 2012 with rather optimism:

> in the Middle East, that is now caught in a tremendous earthquake, stretching from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and beyond, the axis of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel will provide an anchor of stability—and stability is highly important.[49]

Because it was assumed this energy bonanza would redraw the economic map of the region, it has been perceived as a major game changer. For Israel, it will secure sufficient production for its domestic needs, and it could represent a high opportunity for exports to Europe. For Greece and Cyprus, the export project may strengthen their geopolitical position within the European Union (EU) and provide them with precious economic prospects in the middle of a protracted financial crisis.

But the project is not without major uncertainties. Given its complexity, its cost is estimated at 10 billion euros (U.S.$11 billion) which would include the extraction and the transportation to Europe.[50] Once the final investment decision to award the project is made, experts evaluate that it will take about 6 to 7 years to complete. "It is technically challenging and because of that it might be financially challenging" summed up Guy Feldman, advisor to Silvan Shalom, Israeli Energy Minister.[51] To address the issue of costs, Israel, Greece and Cyprus have been trying to make the case to the European Commission in Brussels to attract funding. So far it has been qualified by the EU as a "project of common interest." This status was given by the European Commission to a list of 248 projects which can access a 5.85 billion euros fund from the initiative Connecting Europe Facility between now and 2020. In 2015, the Greek company IGI Poseidon received 2 million euros for preliminary studies.[52] Although this indicates an interest from the EU for the project, political leaders in European capitals have been sensitive to the security and diplomatic issues that surround it.

Channeling energy supplies in regions like the Middle East has always been a major safety issue for investors. In this particular case, the Israeli military

establishment expressed its apprehension regarding the project. Locating export facilities outside Israeli territory is considered a liability by the military, and it was recommended in a special investigation led by the Tzemach committee that the infrastructure be placed under Israeli sovereignty.[53] Moreover, for the last 2 years, the Israeli Navy has pushed for a supplementary budget of $820 million as it estimates it will need four new vessels and manpower to secure the facilities. So far the Israeli government did not accede to this claim.[54]

Security analysts have already speculated that Islamic militias like Hamas or Hezbollah may be tempted to target Israeli off-shore facilities.[55] Given the advanced quality of their missile arsenal (range and accuracy), this definitely plays a role in the Israeli calculus. Back in 2006, in the middle of the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah, the planners in Tel Aviv were taken by surprise when the Party of God used a Chinese-made, Iranian-upgraded C-802 radar-guided missile against an Israeli missile boat patrolling off the Lebanese coast. If a new conflict in Gaza or Lebanon was to occur, it is likely that offshore facilities like gas fields would be valuable targets. This factor raises the security cost of the project to a level that is not easily measurable.

But the project also faces challenges on the diplomatic front. This Israel-Greece-Cyprus initiative has logically triggered strong opposition from Turkey, which does not recognize the government in Nicosia and objects to the claims of the Greek Cypriot Administration over the gas reserves in the south of the island. Ankara responded by conducting air and sea military drills close to the area of the planned project. In August 2011, Foreign Minister

Davutoğlu threatened that Turkey would "show the proper reaction" if the three countries were to go on with the project.[56] A later statement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry elaborated on Ankara's claims:

> International law dictates that the delimitation of the continental shelf or the exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean, which is indeed a semi-enclosed sea, should be effected between the relevant states in an equitable manner . . . The Greek Cypriot Administration does not represent in law or in fact the Turkish Cypriots and Cyprus as a whole. . . . These unlawful acts create tension in the region, compromise and prejudge the Turkish Cypriots' existing and inherent equal rights over the natural resources of the island.[57]

Turkey has its own ambitions as an energy hub for Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor. Since the failure of the Nabucco project, Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan on the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, which could provide Europe with natural gas supplies.

However, competition between Turkey, Greece, Israel and Cyprus is not unavoidable. If the Greek-Cypriot-Israeli project were to include Turkey, it could become a more reliable option, both economically and politically. In terms of feasibility, a pipeline reaching Turkey from Israel would represent half the distance of the Cyprus-Israel option. Engineers estimate that it could cost around $2 billion, which appears much more attractive than the $11 billion for the first project.[58] Politically, it would lower the risks of regional tensions as it removes the Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus from the equation. But this assumes leadership in both Turkey and Israel to settle their dispute.

Despite the commercial incentives, it appears today that the gas conundrum will only be solved by a restoration of bilateral ties at the political level.

Furthermore, it has appeared in the last 2 years that the Israeli-Cypriot natural gas project might not be so promising economically: the decrease of oil prices harmed the world gas markets and, in the longer term, the new discovery in Egypt of possibly the "largest ever" offshore natural gas field could well lower the export prospects for Israel and Cyprus.[59]

The gas fields of the Mediterranean are not the only issue suffering from the tensions in the regional triangle. Another, less-documented issue is the way Turkish-Israeli disputes affect NATO's partnership policy in the Middle East. Turkish diplomats at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels have been playing a game of exporting their issues with Israel to the Transatlantic Alliance. After the Mavi Marmara crisis, blocking the cooperation activities between NATO and Israel, a country member of the Mediterranean Dialogue,[60] became a strategy used by Ankara—through NATO's consensus rule—to isolate Jerusalem.

In 2011 the announcement of the coming deployment of U.S. radar in Turkey—as part of NATO's missile defense project—led to a deep controversy over the issue of the information gathered by the radar and the possibility that this data could be shared with Israel. In practice, information coming from a U.S. radar is fused with data and U.S. intelligence assessments which is shared with allies, including Israel, according to the policy decided in Washington. This quickly became an issue of domestic politics in Ankara with the opposition accusing the government of hosting a military system to defend Israel. Davutoğlu and Erdoğan repeatedly underlined that the purpose of the radar

was to protect Turkey and dismissed the likelihood of sharing data with Israel.[61]

In 2012, Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu stated publicly that Israel would not be allowed to attend the NATO Summit taking place in Chicago in May of that year. A senior Turkish official interviewed by the daily newspaper *Hurriyet* explained:

> There will be no Israeli presence at the NATO meeting unless they issue a formal apology and pay compensation for the Turkish citizens their commandos killed in international waters . . . These are demands from us for the removal of our veto, but this is out of question . . . Those countries who wish to see normalization in ties between Turkey and Israel should advise Israel to apologize and to compensate the killing of Turks in international waters.[62]

In September of the same year, the U.S. government through its ambassador to Ankara, Francis Ricciardone, persuaded the Turks not to cancel the NATO Minotaur exercise because of Israeli presence. In an email that was later leaked to the press, Ricciardone conveyed the message that the Israelis would not be active participants:

> what we have from our Israeli friends is that, if the NATO Minotaur exercise happens, IDF would limit their participation 'observers.' Thus there would be scant chance of IDF + TU forces being credibly accused of 'exercising' together: The Israelis will be observing, not exercising nor 'participating,' in the active sense of the other NATO + partner forces.[63]

There are many other cases where U.S. influence did not succeed. Turkey blocked Israel's participation in the NATO operation "Active Endeavor" in the Med-

iterranean Sea, although the operation has included ships from partner countries since 2004, and despite the fact that NATO and Israel had already signed an agreement in 2010 that was supposed to lead to participation in the operation.[64] Likewise, to enhance its relations with partners, NATO has allowed them to appoint an official representative to the Alliance with his (or her) own office, but again, Turkey prevented Israel's attempt to send someone.[65]

As a result, NATO's Middle East partnership initiative, the Mediterranean Dialogue, has been in a deadlock for years. True, the dialogue was modest in its scope from the outset but because it included Israel, Turkey used its veto power at the North Atlantic Council to block activities that would have involved the Hebrew State. As a consequence, NATO political officers have a rather bitter view on that situation: "NATO's partnership in the Middle East has been hijacked by the tensions between one member and a partner country."[66] On the other side, Israeli officials expressed frustration over the systematic blockage of cooperation with the Alliance. "This is a difficult process and that only reinforces the common view in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that we can't rely on Western cooperation, we are on our own."[67]

This leads us to the third major consequence of the new dynamics within the East Mediterranean Triangle: the increasing distance between Israel and Western allies. The rapprochement between Jerusalem and Athens is only one piece of the puzzle to understand Israel's contemporary foreign policy, and it has to be correlated with the ties that the country has been developing at the same time with countries as diverse as Azerbaijan and India. As written earlier, Israel's relation with Greece follows the logic of hedging, rather than countering, the Turkish opposition. Moreover,

it evidences the diversification of Israeli diplomatic partners beyond its historical allies.

For instance, the Indian-Israeli rapprochement has been in the making for more than two decades. Since establishing diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, India has relied on it as a key arms supplier, second only to Russia. Military-to-military relations became closer, particularly in the area of counterterrorism following the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Indian armed forces at that time expressed growing interest in Israeli counterterrorism techniques, which led to the establishment of joint working groups and military exercises.[68]

With regard to Azerbaijan, Israel is now among the country's top five commercial partners. In the energy sector, Baku provides around 40% of Israel's oil consumption. In 2012, Azerbaijan and Israel signed an arms supply agreement worth $1.6 billion, which included Israel selling drones and missile defense systems to Azerbaijan. This rapprochement riled, not surprisingly, Azerbaijan's neighbor, Iran, which strongly condemned Baku's decision.[69] Azerbaijan surely has an interest in hedging against Iran, as the regime in Tehran remains a key ally of Armenia. In the 1990s, Iran supported the Armenians during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, one of its motives being the presence of a significant community of ethnic Azeris in Iran. Against that backdrop, Israel is a convenient partner for Azerbaijan, conveying a message of resolve to Tehran. In addition, Israeli weapons systems are valuable in the context of the U.S. and EU embargo on arms sales to Azerbaijan. The leadership in Baku, however, is unlikely to cross the threshold of a full alliance for fear of Tehran's reaction. Reflecting this caution, Baku has not opened an embassy in Israel, and it voted at the UN General Assembly in favor of granting observer status to Palestine.[70]

At first glance, these bilateral relations may appear disconnected as the Greeks, Azerbaijanis, Indians, and Gulf Cooperation Council members hardly share commonalities in their strategic agendas. If however, one follows the logic of the periphery doctrine from the 1950s, these ties could be interpreted as parts of a broader strategy revamping the principles formulated by Ben-Gurion back then. With Iran emerging as the primary threat in the eyes of Israeli planners and Turkey scuttling their bilateral partnership, Israel had to revise its diplomatic orientation and craft a new "periphery."

First, all these new ties, including those with Greece, are understood to be diplomatic scenery rather than fundamental strategic moves. In other words, they allow Israel to avoid isolation, but they do not reassure the country against potential threats. Second, if the historical "periphery" was implemented by Ben-Gurion in close coordination with the American ally, this new one looks more like a reaction to a feeling of strategic loneliness by Israeli planners. The unraveling of Israel-Turkey relations coincided with the so-called Arab Spring that led to a protracted crisis in Egypt, an intensified conflict in Syria, and the weakening of Jordan, its last Arab partner standing. In addition, as viewed from Jerusalem, the global landscape looks gloomy with the seeming lack of resolve of the Barack Obama administration vis-à-vis Tehran, and the perceived rise of anti-Israeli sentiments in Europe. For these reasons, the resurrection of the periphery doctrine does not constitute a new grand strategy for Israel, but epitomizes Israel's current foreign policy predicaments. This look-east policy of Israel matters because eventually it affects the ability of the United States to shape the game in the Mediterranean region.

All in all, the diplomatic, security, and economic ramifications of the evolving triangle call for a carefully calibrated U.S. regional policy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The volatility of the Eastern-Mediterranean region, fueled by the evolving power plays between Israel, Greece, Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Cyprus matters to the United States for several reasons. As we demonstrated, the competition affects the security arrangements in Europe, with NATO's Middle East partnership being in a deadlock. The natural gas projects brought about disputes over the territorial claims in the area and in the coming years, without a diplomatic settlement, it could lead to rising naval skirmishes with gunboat diplomacy becoming a norm similar to the practices witnessed in the South China Sea.

In addition to these internal factors, the Eastern-Mediterranean security environment will be shaped by the evolution of crises in its vicinity. On the one hand, Turkey faces increasing security demands as the Syrian conflict spreads along its territory. It exacerbates both, the stand-off with Kurdish forces and the threat of Islamic terrorism as demonstrated by the bombing attack in Ankara in October 2015. Furthermore, the Russian air campaign in Syria, starting in September 2015, led to skirmishes with the Turkish military as Russian planes and drones strayed into Turkish airspace. On the other hand, the Iranian nuclear deal adopted in 2015 amplifies the level of anxiety in Israel's defense community. As a result, the U.S. government has been conveying a message of solidarity and reassurance through closer military cooperation with Israeli forces.

To prevent instability, the U.S. has to navigate between the concerns and the sensitivity of three allies. The key will be to find the right balance between reassuring one ally without antagonizing the other. The Turks have perceived U.S. pressures against Ankara in the NATO arena vis-à-vis partnership with Israel as an unfair treatment. Turkish diplomats frequently complain that the United States should give priority to the interests of a NATO ally, and not to those of a mere partner like Israel. On the other hand, the Israelis sometimes feel like the Americans are cajoling the Turkish government to avoid Erdoğan's game of brinkmanship, and, since late-2014, to get Turkey to participate in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL in Syria. In an article explicitly titled "Turkey is no American Ally," Efraim Inbar from Bar-Ilan University expresses strong criticisms which constitute a fair account of views in Tel Aviv:

> Turkey is officially a NATO ally, and President Barrack Obama has called the current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a friend. But Erdogan-led Turkey does not behave as an ally or a friend of the US … It is not clear why Washington puts up with such Turkish behavior. The Obama administration seems to be unable to call a spade a spade. It refuses to acknowledge that Turkey is a Trojan horse in NATO, and that Ankara undermines American interests in the Middle East and elsewhere.[71]

It is doubtful that a regional approach to U.S. policy in the East Mediterranean would succeed. In fact, the zero-sum game logic is so ingrained in the decisionmaking process of the three local players—Greece, Israel, and Turkey—that a regional approach is likely to stumble.

The core issue of the current troubles in the East Mediterranean Triangle is the crisis in the Turkish-Israeli relations. As a result, the first measure to prevent further escalation in this rift is to disconnect the Turkish-Israeli file from the Greek and Cypriot cases. U.S. diplomats and officers should carefully dismiss the counterbalancing narrative behind the Israeli-Greek rapprochement. Although increasing ties between Athens and Jerusalem in trade, tourism, or maritime security are welcomed, trilateral military exercises should avoid conveying any offensive message to the Turkish authorities. The United States could make sure that drills like Noble Dina will not be perceived as a means to intimidate Ankara. This implies choosing the scenario of the exercise prudently and coupling these initiatives with diplomatic reassurances to Turkey. Given the intricacies of the competition in the East Mediterranean, it is necessary to avoid misperceptions and miscalculations.

Following the same logic of prevention, the U.S. administration may address the NATO issue by making the case that the Alliance's partnership policy should not be undermined by the tensions between one member nation and a partner country. It does not mean challenging or ignoring Turkish political agenda; this would only bring further obstruction from Ankara. However, the scope of NATO-Israel partnership is by nature modest and should not be the issue of a fierce diplomatic fight. For instance, activities involving military education and training should not suffer from the crisis. A distinct line can be drawn between military operational activities with no strategic implications and political-military initiatives with high visibility. Under the current circumstances, it would not be realistic to expect Turkey to allow strategic coop-

eration with Israel within the Alliance. Topics such as missile defense cooperation or intelligence exchanges are unlikely to be discussed in the Alliance as long as the bilateral dispute is not solved. Admittedly, for the NATO officers in Brussels, this situation is hardly a desirable end-state.

This is why a second step would look at the ways to reinitiate political and diplomatic dialogue between Israel and Turkey. The United States could act as a mediator by convening working-level meetings to discuss common areas of interest. Objectively both countries have a mutual interest in cooperating over the Syrian crisis and its effects on the region. They both suffer from the spill-over effect of the conflict and are likely to be targets of terrorist organizations operating from the Syrian territory. To make it work, these talks should involve diplomats and policy advisors but not yet politicians. Back in 2013, the general assumption was that the crisis would be solved first at the highest level. This led to the very public apology of Netanyahu to Erdoğan for the Mavi Marmara incident. But as testified by the officials we interviewed for this study, the level of distrust and enmity between the heads of government of both countries is such that a bottom-up approach has more chances to succeed. The time will be ripe for the political leaders to step in only when the working-level exchanges have created an environment of confidence. The major uncertainty regarding this phase is obviously its duration: although a hasty approach certainly leads to failure, endless talks between experts are not likely to achieve gains either. This is why the U.S. diplomatic apparatus would have to seize the moment and to pressure, when necessary, the stakeholders to move to the next level, keeping in mind obviously the electoral calendar in both countries. True, it may look like a mission with remote

chances of success, but after all, the 1958 rapprochement between Turkey and Israel was by all accounts more unlikely to occur than one today. If one lesson has to be learned from the history of the East Mediterranean, it is that the seemingly perpetual freezing of relations can swiftly stop if national leaders revise their strategic priorities in light of new events.

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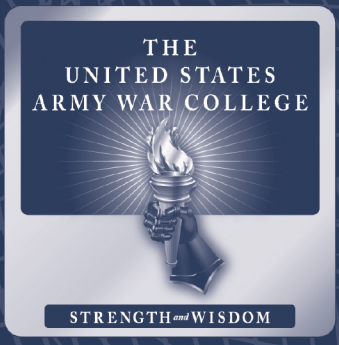

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