

Greece, Cyprus and Israel Bearing Gifts

Some developments in international affairs occasion no surprise. The announcement on January 28, 2016 by the military wing of the terrorist group Hamas, that controls the Gaza strip, that seven of its members were killed when a tunnel, which they were repairing in order to attack Israeli civilians, had collapsed reminded the world that Islamist terrorism was continuing. The eagerness of European countries to make business arrangements with Iran illustrate that the supposed concern for human rights and about the threat of a nuclear Iran is of small importance compared with economic opportunities.

What is a surprise, and a significant one, was the tripartite cooperation agreement signed in Nicosia on January 28, 2016 by Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, the first summit between the three countries to work together on a number of issues. Already on the previous day, Israel and Greece had made agreements as well as making clear that Turkey was not excluded from the cooperative arrangements.

In July 2015 stunning mosaics were found in the ruins of the floor of a fifth century synagogue in the village of Huqoq, near Capernaum in the Galilee in Israel. One of them suggests an image of Alexander the Great, thus reinforcing or confirming the legend of his meeting with the Jewish high priest of Jerusalem. This is highly likely because of the presence in the mosaics of elephants associated with Greek armies.

Whatever the accuracy of the meeting between Greeks and Jews twenty four hundred years ago, there were no elephants present nor is there any legend about the meetings between present day Greek and Israeli leaders in recent months. Relations between

the two countries have been uneven, to say the least, since the end of World War II so the growing relationship has come as a surprise.

This is especially the case regarding the utterances and policies of Alexis Tsipras, Greek Prime Minister since January 2015 and leader of the radical left wing political party Syriza, thought to be unfriendly towards Israel. In his visit to Israel on November 25-26, 2015, Tsipras when signing the guest book of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem said it was a "great honor to be in your historical capital."

The present and future U.S. administrations might take notice. So far, no other leader of a European country or any U.S. President, in spite of the urging of Congress, has acknowledged officially that Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel.

For some years Greek leaders have looked favorably on the Palestinian cause. The Greek parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling for recognition of a Palestinian state independent of negotiations between the parties. One small gesture, in contrast, was the Greek law of 2011 to allow Holocaust survivors and their descendants to regain Greek citizenship. The gesture was largely sentimental and symbolic since few Jews were likely to accept it.

The change in Greek policy was demonstrated on December 1, 2015 by a statement of Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias. Greece became the second European country, following Hungary, to refuse to accept the guidelines of the European Union not to label as "Made in Israel" products made in the disputed Israeli settlements. Greece had refused to engage in what is in part a boycott of Israel.

Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu in meeting Tsipras and Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades told them that the Old

City of Jerusalem, the city of David, "is our Acropolis." Certainly, the two peoples, Greeks and Jews, share a rich heritage and have laid the basis for much of modern civilization. Greece and Israel can rightfully claim to be based on that historic heritage.

Equally important today are the bilateral agreements by the two countries in recent months on a number of issues: tourism, public security, infrastructure, roads safety, water, and training of diplomats.

The new positive attitude of Greece towards Israel, both concerned with scientific and technological development, has been warmed by two factors: mutual economic benefit; and cooperation between the two countries and Cyprus.

The dramatic cooperation is planned in two ways. One is the joint venture between Greece, Israel, and Cyprus to build a natural gas pipeline from the Eastern Mediterranean via Cyprus to Crete and then to the European mainland, tapping large gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000 billion cubic meters of natural gas.

Greece will be the bridge for the transfer of Eastern Mediterranean gas to the European mainland.

The second is an ambitious proposal to create what would be the world's largest underwater power cable, the high voltage EuroAsia connector.

These proposals have been fostered by the discovery off the southern coast of Cyprus of a large supply, the so called Aphrodite Gas field, in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is about 21 miles from an Israeli gas field. In addition, Israel which already has discovered the Tamar and Leviathan fields in 2009 and 2010 has now found signs of another large natural gas field, about 9 trillion cubic feet, off its coast.

Cyprus and Israel demarcated their maritime border in 2010, but Turkey has not recognized a border agreement with Cyprus.

Israel has called on Turkey to recognize the right of Cyprus to explore for natural gas.

The tripartite arrangements will have both general benefits, political and economic, and specific benefits, such as agreements on issues of water management, tourism, and high tech.

The arrangements will not only have an economic impact, aiming to promote development and stability in the area. They can also have an important political impact as Greece and Cyprus have suggested in playing a role in better relations between Israel and the EU, and also help in a peace process with Palestinians.

The tripartite agreement may have two other impacts. It may mitigate the hostile attitude of Turkey towards Israel since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, and hasten the return of full diplomatic ties, a subject now discussed in secret negotiations, which it broke at that time. It explains the unexpected statement of Turkish President Erdogan that normalization of relations with Israel was possible.

Also, it might lead to better relations between Turkey and Cyprus. Paradoxically, in this tango of international relations, Israel may act as the peacemaker between Greece and Turkey. The friendliness of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus is not aimed at hostility towards Turkey.

As in the case of Greece, the attitude of Cyprus to Israel was not always friendly, especially in the 1980s when it supported the Palestinian point of view, in spite of the fact Cyprus benefited economically because often it was the destination for Jewish couples to wed if they were unable or unwilling to have a religious marriage in Israel. But since then the two countries have cooperated on various military, cultural, and political issues. Today, only about 450 Jewish families, mostly foreign citizens there for business purposes, live in

Cyprus.

The tripartite agreement is not simply important in itself. It gives the answer to those individuals and groups, academic and religious, who have taken the reactionary route in calling for a boycott of the State of Israel and its citizens. Why are these reactionaries so opposed to the kind of cooperation, progress, and development that Greece and Cyprus are advocating?