

Guiding Principles for Israel's Foreign Policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean

Recommendations of a Mitvim Institute Task Team□

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In recent years,¹ the Eastern Mediterranean has become [a central focus](#) of world powers, of states in the Middle East, Europe, and beyond, and of international corporations. Regional geopolitical developments, as well as economic opportunities generated by natural gas discoveries in the Mediterranean, have contributed to this trend and turned the Eastern Mediterranean into a distinct sub-region perceived as having unique features. Israel plays a central role in this development. Israeli diplomacy identified these trends correctly, successfully becoming an active and dominant player in the region. The natural gas findings in Israel's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) provide it with a wider range of diplomatic options, helping it promote relationships with various states in the region; including some engaged in conflict with each other. Israelis regard the Mediterranean as an important component of their identity, as reflected in the [2018 Israeli Foreign Policy Index](#) of the Mitvim Institute, in which 22 percent of those surveyed claimed Israel belongs predominantly to this region (compared with 28 percent who said it belongs to the Middle East and 23 percent to Europe).

Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and the Gaza Strip form the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. This region, however, is still in a state of consolidation with additional actors expressing great interest in events there, among them Russia and the US; neighbors such as Italy, Jordan and the Balkan states; and international corporations, chief among them major energy companies. The sea is largely what defines the region, strengthening the potential for deeper cooperation in the fields of coastal development, shipping and environmental protection by using existing mechanisms in these spheres to open channels of communication with actors that are normally on the other side of a closed border. In January 2019, the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#) was launched in Cairo, with the participation of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Cyprus and Italy. This is a unique development for Israeli foreign policy – membership in a regional association along with the Palestinians and neighboring Arab states highlights the potential of the Eastern Mediterranean as a new space for regional belonging, Israeli-Arab cooperation and advancement of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Israel has been successful in developing a tripartite relationship with Cyprus and Greece verging on a strategic alliance, as leaders of the three states often declare. Their cooperation has expanded into many areas within a fairly short timeframe. These include spheres of diplomacy and strategy, of defense, economics, energy (with major, but challenging potential), tourism, science, civil society and more. The Greece-Cyprus-Israel triangle (the Hellenic Alliance) has created a new geopolitical architecture based on a platform of joint

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interests but also on joint liberal-democratic values of open regimes and societies, and even on a shared history. This is a unique diplomatic structure, as is the Greece-Cyprus-Egypt triangle and even talk (mainly Cypriot) of similar triangles with states such as Lebanon or Jordan (Cyprus believes it has to balance its strategic relationship with Israel, to a certain degree, by creating similar partnerships vis-à-vis the Arab world). Although the message conveyed by the Greek-Cypriot-Israeli triangle carries anti-Turkey undertones, Israel is careful to stress that it is a non-exclusive force alignment directed at other states, but rather a framework for cooperation open to anyone accepting its basic principles, Turkey included. Although it is obvious that without significant progress in resolving the conflict between Turks and Greeks in Cyprus such positive developments are unlikely, the general message Israel conveys is of openness and inclusiveness rather than estrangement.

The parallel Cyprus-Greece-Egypt triangle grew out of an understanding by each of the three of their congruent interests, as well as the importance of the message it projects toward the region itself and beyond. Moreover, there appears to be an understanding, even if not openly expressed, that it is too soon to draw Israel into such a framework, even though the mutual interests and resilience of the cooperation between Israel and Egypt are increasingly obvious in recent years. Cyprus, which is well aware of its relatively modest weight, boasts, with a large measure of truth, of its central role in taking advantage of regional developments. At the end of 2018, Cyprus declared its intention to form a secretariat to coordinate the activity of its various triangles, which could also serve as a possible point of contact among them in the future.

In many aspects, Turkey is a unique player in this region. Its relationships with all the above mentioned states are highly complex (to put it mildly). [Its current relationship with Israel](#) is tense and prone to periodic crises, with 2019 getting off to an uncertain start given that neither have ambassadorial level representation in the other's capital. The Cypriot conflict also casts a heavy shadow over its relations with Greece and Cyprus, and the upheavals of the Arab Spring and its support for the Islamic Brotherhood regime of Egypt's former President Morsi place Turkey in a clear conflict of interest and even hostility with Egypt. Turkey has been cooperating with Iran and Russia in the Syrian crisis, not based on a strategic alliance but rather on a communality of interests among various countries, some of them enemies. At the same time, and despite the complexity of the situation, Turkey is too central and important a player in this arena for Israel to ignore, even though both countries now share less regional interests than they used to.

The Palestinian issue (mostly Gaza and Jerusalem) lies at the heart of the [divisions between Israel and Turkey](#), along with the Kurdish issue (Israel's support for Kurdish independence in northern Iraq does not help to instill trust between the two sides) and lack of progress in the construction of a gas pipeline between Israel and Turkey. The ideological platform of the Erdoğan regime, which is sympathetic of the Muslim Brotherhood, poses an obvious obstacle to rapprochement, as does Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, whereas the Trump administration does not see Erdoğan's Turkey as a reliable ally and does not work to promote Israeli-Turkish reconciliation. Nonetheless, both Israel and Turkey have an interest in normalizing their relations, also in order to maintain (and even expand) their extensive economic cooperation, realize the energetic potential of their ties (a complex undertaking in

itself) and limit Iran's involvement in Syria. In any case, this is a challenging relationship but one that is important to preserve, especially given Israeli and Turkish regional dominance.

While the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in shaping relationships in the Eastern Mediterranean has been eroded in recent years (following regional upheavals and developments in the international arena), the conflict still limits Israel's ability to maximize the region's potential – as the Turkish example suggests. In this regard, the situation in the Gaza Strip is the most dominant and has the greatest impact. The Mediterranean perspective could add a new dimension to [efforts to rehabilitate Gaza](#) (such as the idea of building a port in Cyprus to serve Gaza or exploring the Gaza Marine gas field across from Gaza's coast) and to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The energy resources have opened new horizons for Israel, expanding its leeway on the diplomatic front. This is one of the main driving forces for change in the region, as is the great international interest generated in recent years by the Eastern Mediterranean. For now, Israel is maneuvering in the new energy-diplomacy arena vis-à-vis a number of main players. Israel is [cooperating with Egypt](#) to implement mutual gas exploitation plans. The cooperation potential with Cyprus may be accelerated significantly with the discovery of major gas reserves in Cyprus' EEZ, although the Greek-Turkish conflict on the island will continue to pose a challenge. The idea of laying a gas pipeline from Israel to Europe via Turkey is moot for political and economic reasons and the feasibility of the EastMed Gas Pipeline project by Israel, Greece, Italy and the EU [remains unclear](#); even experts in the gas market are skeptical about it. Nonetheless, the countries involved are displaying consistent willingness to examine the option and advance it to the greatest extent possible. An important achievement in this regard is the gas export agreement Israel signed with Jordan, which boosts the [Israeli-Jordanian strategic relationship](#). The varied export alternatives Israel allegedly enjoys are to help it, at least in the diplomatic context, juggle a variety of balls and, as mentioned, provide it with significant diplomatic leeway that it appears to be exploiting wisely.

In light of the situation as described above, these are the principles that should guide Israel in its activity in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin:

1. Maintaining diplomatic maneuvering capability and expanding it: The regional upheaval of the Arab Spring, which highlighted Israel's stability, and the discovery of natural gas reserves in the Mediterranean, have positioned Israel in a convenient and attractive spot in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel should continue to deepen its relationship with the countries with which it has a clear commonality of interests – Egypt, Jordan, Greece and Cyprus – all the while underscoring (reiterating both in practical and declarative terms) that these ties are not directed at other regional players and that Israel is interested in developing relationships with additional countries in the region. Israel must also preserve and promote its policy dialogue with central actors relevant to the region, such as Russia and the EU. This, in addition to developing relations with European states displaying a growing interest in the energy arena, such as Italy (given the involvement of the Italian energy company ENI in projects in Egypt, Cyprus, and Lebanon), as well as Bulgaria and Serbia.

2. Renewing the diplomatic dialogue with Turkey: Israel's interest lies in finding ways to mend (to the extent possible) its relations with Turkey despite existing disputes, some of

which are deep and ideological. Turkey is too important a country to ignore, and its distancing from the West does not serve Israel's interests. Israel must move toward a renewed diplomatic dialogue, restoration of ambassadors and deeper civilian ties. While simultaneously leveraging the booming economic relations between the two countries and appearing to not be desperately courting Turkey, establish a joint mechanism to manage disagreements, contain conflicts, and identify mutual regional interests (such as in Syria and advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace).

3. Deepening cooperation with Greece and Cyprus: The relationship among Israel, Greece and Cyprus (the Hellenic Alliance) is an asset for all sides, proving strategic depth that serves Israel's national interest and must be preserved and deepened without being dragged into commitments that are not necessarily in line with Israel's interest. It is essential to base these ties on cooperation in a wide array of areas, to make the alliance sustainable even during less favorable political conditions. Israel, Greece and Cyprus must highlight the democratic dimension they share. It can serve as a value-driven basis of their relationship in line with the principles of the EU (and can therefore help promote Israel-EU relations), distinguishing this alliance from the relations that Israeli governments have established with far right and populist European leaders and parties who distance themselves from liberal democracy.

4. Advancing an innovative regional architecture of trilateral alliances: The tripartite structure created by Israel, Greece and Cyprus constitutes a unique diplomatic-strategic model that should be examined for its relevance for additional cooperation in the region and beyond. In light of the deep and unique affinity between Greece and Cyprus, this model was perceived as natural for them in constructing their relationship with Israel. Israel would do well to examine how it could leverage this relationship for additional trilateral alliances and for strengthening other alliances that Greece and Cyprus are advancing. The similar tripartite model developing among Egypt, Greece and Cyprus serves Israel's interest well without Israel having to strive to join it, at least for now. The leading role Cyprus is trying to play is also in line with Israeli interests. Nicosia is well aware of its humble footprint in the region, on the one hand, and of its unique geographic and diplomatic position on the other, and is acting accordingly.

5. Leveraging regional dynamics to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking: The affinity of the Palestinians in general, and of the Gaza Strip in particular, for the Mediterranean could serve Israel's interest. Israel could cooperate with the states intrinsic to the region and active in it for the sake of improving the situation in Gaza and promoting the peace process. This can be done by having regional actors provide additional input into Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, expand channels of dialogue and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as broaden the scope of potential solutions and international incentives that could support the peace process. For now, Israel's unique position in the region should be leveraged to counter the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (for example by establishing a seaport for Gaza in Cyprus, developing the gas field across from the Gaza coast, increased coordination with Egypt, and allowing Turkey to fund infrastructure projects there). In addition, a political component should be added to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, of which Israel and the Palestinian Authority are members. This component could serve as the basis for a new international mechanism to help advance peace – with the participation of Arab and European states as well as the sides to the conflict.

6. Advancing the establishment of regional institutions: The cooperation models that have emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean enable the advancement of new regional institutions. These institutions should deepen the principles of the regional partnership, and focus initially on civilian issues such as healthcare, desalination, environmental protection, search and rescue, and culture. The energy sources, which serve as the basis for the emerging regional cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, require joint activity in such fields. The political limitations, which have precluded to date the creation of inclusive frameworks of this kind, have not disappeared but have weakened to an extent that allows progress. The regional gas forum is proof that given appropriate motivation, Israel and the Palestinian Authority can be included in a joint framework. Nonetheless, the makeup of the forum also reflects the difficulty in harnessing Lebanon, as well as Turkey's exclusion, and it is therefore incumbent on its members to seek solutions. Models of regional frameworks created in the Western Mediterranean should be examined to determine whether they are relevant for the Eastern Mediterranean.

7. Maintaining dialogue channels to Lebanon: Despite attempts by the US and the UN to mediate between Israel and Lebanon, the two states continue to disagree over their maritime border, on top of their other differences. An American compromise proposal is informally on the table, but so far, no progress has been made on the issue. It is vital to keep the channels of diplomatic dialogue between the countries open, even if this can only be achieved through a third country or multilateral forums. Such channels could help ease tensions and prevent escalation with Hezbollah. The tremendous potential for those states in wise exploitation of the energy in their waters should be emphasized, and Israel should seek whether additional countries can contribute to mediation missions between Israel and Lebanon.

8. Establishing mechanisms for coordination and activation of security forces: The gas discoveries, as well as Russia's return to the region, have expanded the presence of foreign navies – American, Russian, Iranian – in the region. This requires Israel and its neighbors to pay close attention to security aspects and prevention of unplanned escalation. Relevant countries in the region have even enlarged their naval defense budgets in order to protect their EEZ vis-à-vis non-state actors that could carry out terror attacks. At this point, it would be wise to promote an Israeli-American dialogue focusing on developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to expand the dialogue and cooperation on this issue with the EU, the Hellenic countries, and, to the extent possible, with other regional actors.

9. Encouraging international involvement in regional mediation. The involvement of international actors in the region could result in additional conflicts of interest, but also potentially stabilize the region and help establish regional institutions. International involvement could also contribute to conflict resolution processes, on issues such as the marking of maritime borders, and even encourage regional cooperation. Israel should initiate and encourage such involvement, which would contribute to forging essential regional cooperation frameworks in coordination with the relevant actors. Such cooperation should not be limited to the formal state level, and can take place among civil society organizations. Informal dialogue channels, with the involvement and encouragement of international actors, could also provide a space for interaction and exchange between experts and policy

analysts from countries who do not have official diplomatic ties or are in the midst of bilateral crises.

10. Forging a Mediterranean identity. The Mediterranean Basin, in its eastern part and beyond, provides Israel with unique potential to forge a Mediterranean identity linked to both the Middle East and Europe. Diversification of Israel's relationships in the region and their foundation on cooperation on less-controversial issues, would increase trust with regional partners and would help in forging a joint identity. The vision of a "Mediterranean identity" based on joint history, culture, climate and geography has existed for years in diplomatic thinking and in Israeli cultural-literary works. It should be strengthened and nurtured to underscore Israel's affinity for the region. Efforts in such directions should be turned inward towards the Israeli public (which, according to Mitvim Institute surveys, already understand the importance of such regional belonging) and outwards toward the Mediterranean space. For example, Israel should deepen its involvement in regional frameworks of which it is already a member – such as the Union for the Mediterranean ([UfM](#)) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean ([PAM](#)) – and seek to join regional frameworks in which it does not take part yet (such as the [Mediterranean Games](#), held once in four years).