

ISRAEL-GREECE: THE THIRD CHANCE

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The Turkish Flotilla (June 2010) and the devastation of strategic relationship between Israel and Turkey, led to a surprising initiative by two prime ministers: Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and George Papandreou of Greece. It has been reported that personal relationship and chemistry between Papandreou and Netanyahu - - both of whom earned refined American education - - helped to build the present surprising renewed and promising relationship between Greece and Israel. It is fitting that the Israel's relations with Greece should have their own *raison d'etre*, and not only as a result of the Turkey-Israel relations.

Greece and Israel, so close geographically in the Mediterranean basin (and the sole non-Muslim actors there), but in the first forty years of Israel's existence (1948 - 1990) could not have been farther apart. Fear for the fate of the Greek communities in the Arab Middle East prevented Greece until 1990 from opening an embassy in Israel. And even when the Greek Diaspora, primarily in Alexandria, Egypt, was widely scattered as a result of the Suez crisis in 1956, no improvement occurred in relations between the two countries. The emphasis placed in Israel on the relations with Turkey, certainly did not help relations between Athens and Jerusalem.

A second chance, about twenty years old (1990 - 2010), which was given to the Israel-Greece relations, began with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries (1990). The membership of Greece and Cyprus in the European Union stressed the need to have good relations between Israel and the Greek world; this relationship was greatly improved since. Starting in 2010, we are at the gateway of the third chapter in the relationship between Israel and Greece. It is fitting that the two countries will make the most of it.

The common denominator is great: no other two nations in the world have suffered so much and were the victim of the rise of nationalism and the resurgence of the Nation-State (one state for one nation). Over a million Greeks who lived for thousands of years in Asia Minor, which is Western Turkey today, were expelled in the early 1920s, to the last one of them, in the well known "Transfer"; Turkey became a state for Turks only. Greeks who lived for thousands of years in Egypt were expelled by Abed al-Nasser; and Egypt became a country for Egyptians only. The slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe in 1939 - 1945, turned many of the European states to countries of one nation each, in other words the embodiment of the pure nation-state concept.

Greece and Israel also share common denominators in the present: they both push back attempts of external coercion to resolve the conflicts in which they are involved. Such is the situation with Israel and its conflict with the

Palestinians, and the Greek side in the Cypriot conflict. Greece and Israel being small states, surrounded by larger countries with greater economies that may make them redundant, and sometimes patronize them, constitutes the third common denominator. Occasionally, as a result, the two recognize their limitations. The disgraceful and humiliating financial situation in which Athens finds itself versus the giants of the European Union (Germany, France), only emphasizes this aspect. The difficulty in dealing with foreign migrants (Greece, like Israel on the Egyptian border, is building a wall along its border with Turkey to stop thousands of foreign immigrants from invading her); proximity to very unstable regions in the Balkans and the Middle East; the danger of *Jihadi* terrorism; the considerable value of religion in public life; the "Arab Spring" and the instabilities it has created; the uncertainties around Turkey's policies in the region; as well as other challenges and difficulties are additional common grounds for both countries.

Both Israel and Greece have strong Diaspora and lobbies in North America, which are recently doing a lot to bring the two mother countries closer. Greece's interest in the Israeli arms and energy industries, as well as in potential Greek-Cypriot-Israeli energy projects and in the hundred of thousands of Israeli tourists who replaced Turkey with Greece, show the common economic interest, and emphasize the potential third phase in the relations of Athens and Jerusalem. As noted before, these relationships have their own right to existence, and they deserve to get a chance. There is an incredibly comprehensive willingness on the Greek and Israeli sides for a huge upgrade in the relations. Israel and Greece must not miss this third opportunity, let alone that Israelis learned, and more than once, that strategic alliances are being built slowly; their destruction is rapid.