

Military Cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus

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The trilateral military cooperation, begun in November 2017, has all the necessary components to become decisive for the three countries in the eastern Mediterranean in the long-term. In addition, the US is fully behind the three countries, sending a clear signal to Ankara not to provoke conflict in the region.

Turkey, which is still a member of NATO, is not in a position to prevent Israel from cooperating with NATO, although such cooperation is a thorn in the side of Turkey. Although Cypriot military exercises with Israel upset Turkey, it cannot prevent the two countries from cooperating. That is why we see a new military architecture in the eastern Mediterranean, which will shape the security relations of the three countries in the coming years.

The new architecture was not created in a vacuum, but is a by-product of the steadily deteriorating Israeli-Turkish relations, which reached a nadir with the ‘Marmara incident’ in May 2010. Although the Israeli government has officially apologized for operational mistakes in dealing with the Turkish flotilla ships and compensation package has been negotiated in mid-2016, bilateral relations remain frosty. Moreover, the military component of Israeli-Turkish relations, which used to be a backbone of relations, is still missing and is unlikely to reappear in the near future. For this reason, Israel began looking for like-minded partners in the eastern Mediterranean as early as 2012. And these partners are not only Greece and Cyprus but also other NATO members, since Greece is a member of NATO.

From Air Forces and Navy Multinational Cooperation

Trilateral military cooperation began in November 2017, while the first ‘Blue Flag’ multinational exercise in Israel, including Greece, Italy and US, took place in November 2013. In October 2015, a follow-up air drill pitted Israel, Greece, Poland, and US, against a fictional enemy state. Another air drill with participation of France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Poland and US took place in March 2017. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hecht, Israel Air Force’s (IAF’s) Chief of International Affairs, said that “the Blue Flag exercise is not a competitive event. It is about partnership. Furthermore, it is not only the exercise itself but the build-up to the

exercise where we have all the participants planning together, getting to know one another, building relations and talking about how we fight.”



An Israeli Sailor during Exercise “Noble Dina 2016” in Souda Bay, Greece, in 2016.
“Noble Dina” is an annual trilateral exercise involving US, Hellenic and Israeli forces to increase interoperability and tactical expertise in a number of warfare areas.

In March 2017, the IAF participated in the joint exercise ‘Iniohos 2017’ in Greece in which Italy, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and US also took part. The follow-up exercise ‘Iniohos 2019’ of the Air Force with participation of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, UAE and US took place in April 2019. The most recent ‘Blue Flag’ exercise, in which Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy and US participated, took place in November 2019. It served as an opportunity to improve interoperability between the aforementioned air forces.



Photo: US Air Force

During exercise "Iniohos 2017", a US Air Force officer prepares for a local area orientation flight at Andravida Air Base, Greece, in March 2017.

The origin of the exercise dates back to the late 1980's, when it was established as a small scale air warfare exercise with only aircraft of the Hellenic Air Force.

In November 2017, officers and sailors of the Israeli Navy were invited by the Greek Navy to participate in a NATO exercise. Crews from Bulgaria, Greece, Israel, Italy, Romania, UK and US, as well as international observers, held land briefings and planning meetings. In the second week, they went into action, and rehearsed a series of scenarios. Such scenarios included sea-based anti-terrorist operations, handling enemy swarm boats loaded with explosives, making threats from the air, and practicing how to rescue stranded ships and provide medical care to injured people. Lieutenant Colonel Yaniv Lavi, Commander of the Israeli Navy's 32nd Squadron, said that "the learning process was mutual. We learned from the others, and we passed on our knowledge. We are improving all of the time."

Lieutenant Colonel Assaf Boneh, Head of the Israeli Navy's International Cooperation Planning Branch, noted that Israel has benefited immensely from the growing maritime partnership. For example, Greece operates similar vessels to Israel's – such as German-made air independent propulsion submarines. Boneh

acknowledged that “Maintaining such submarines is a complex matter and requires a lot of knowledge. The Greeks have technical knowledge on maintenance and we are happy to learn from them. We expect our cooperation with Greeks and others to only increase.”

That is exactly what happened. In August 2019, the Israeli navy, with the participation of ten other navies, led an exercise to prepare the country for a devastating earthquake. This was the first time that the navy has conducted a large-scale exercise focusing on the sea-based response to a severe earthquake. The ten foreign navies included Canada, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, NATO, UK and US and the non-aligned country of Chile.

Another naval exercise was the ‘Noble Dina’ exercise, which began in April 2012 with the participation of Greece, Israel and US. It has been conducted annually since then. The most recent exercise, ‘Noble Dina’, in April 2019, stretched from the north of the island of Crete to the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and involved ships from Greece, Israel, US and Cyprus.

It can, therefore, be expected that multinational cooperation between like-minded nations such as Israel and Greece will intensify in the coming years, as the participants not just learn each other’s tactics and strategy, but also gain insights into the strengths and weaknesses of pilots and sailors in an unfamiliar air and sea space operations.

Bilateral Cooperation

The first-ever IAF and HAF joint exercise in Israel took place in December 2016. Colonel Amnon, Commander of the Ramat David Air Force Base (AFB), noted that: “The Greek deployment was of historical significance because the AFB usually does not host foreign fighter division deployments. This was a trailblazing event. The last time foreign fighter aircraft were hosted in the AFB was in 1956.” Colonel Amnon acknowledged that “the Greeks are our long-time partners and the current exercise is a step forward in our cooperation. The fact that this was a relatively small deployment (total of three squadrons) allowed us to create an intimate training exercise and develop tighter relationships.” Major Dimitrios Gritzalotis, Commander of the Greek deployment, commented, “I hope to profit from this cooperation in a way that both sides see the scenarios they train for daily and from a

different point of view. We expect to continue the cooperation between the two air forces and in the near future host the Israeli aircrews as they did us.”

In June 2018, IAF together with HAF conducted a joint exercise over Greek skies, during which long-distance flights and dozens of aircraft in unknown territory were trained with air-to-air refuelling exercises and mutual acquaintance of flight crews. About 40 Israeli fighter planes from 10 fighter squadrons as well as tanker planes, which never landed during two missions, participated in the exercise. The exercise was part of a series planned for 2018 to improve the operational readiness of the Israeli armed forces.

Photo: HAF



Joint Exercises

In November 2018, the IAF F-16I fighter jet squadrons returned from a combined training in Greece alongside the HAF. Major Y., a pilot at the 201st Squadron that operates the F-16I aircraft, said that: “We are happy about the cooperation with the HAF.” According to Major I., Head of the IAF’s Europe and Asia International

Affairs Branch, “the exercise in Greece provided us with the opportunity to fly over expansive terrain, and the tall mountains helped simulate the operational theatre.” An additional advantage in the joint exercise is that Greece, as a member of NATO, operates according to NATO combat doctrines. These doctrines differ from the ones used by the IAF, and this, in turn, provides an opening for mutual learning and exchange of opinions.

In addition to air force exercises, Greece and Israel conducted a joint naval exercise as early as July 2012. Israeli Navy ships conducted five exercises in the Mirto Sea. The exercises included firing missiles at the rocky islet of Karavia west of Milos.

In November 2017, three Israeli missile ships and a naval helicopter participated in the Hellenic Navy’s autumn ‘war games’. The main aim was to provide training in how to deal with modern maritime threats while conducting evacuations of civilian populations.

During the drill Lieutenant Colonel Lavi, Commander of the Israeli delegation, said that “the naval forces carried out advanced training in search and rescue, prevention of maritime terrorist attacks, as well as advanced maritime medical evacuations.” This is an indication of the enhanced military cooperation between Israel and Greece in the naval sector and we can expect further naval exercises between the two countries. Alongside Israeli-Greek cooperation, Israel-Cyprus military cooperation has intensified. For instance, in March 2017 Israel participated in a three-day joint military exercise with Cyprus, in the course of which the IAF F-16s were seen in the skies over Paphos International Airport and subsequently tested Cypriot air-defences. A military spokesman of the Greek Cyprus Ministry of Defence said that: “Air and ground forces from both countries took part in the exercise. The drill aimed to maintain the readiness of the forces for any emergency.”

In June, more than 500 elite Israeli commandos, supported by attack helicopters and fighter jets, held a three-day intensive drill on Cyprus. The unnamed senior IDF officers said the exercise was the first of its kind and one of the largest exercises by the commandos on foreign soil. It was the largest drill since 2014, when both countries agreed to hold joint exercises as part of their military cooperation.

Cypriot troops also visited Israel for a two-week counter-terrorism training in October 2017 at a mock Arab town in the Israeli Army's Tzeelim training base.

The aforementioned Israeli-Greece naval exercise in November 2017 was followed by a major military exercise in Cyprus, involving air and ground forces from both countries. The exercise, which is part of the ongoing cooperation between the IDF and the Cypriot military, was pre-planned as part of the Israeli 2017 training programme and is designed to maintain the competence and readiness of the forces. Therefore, it can be said that 2017 marks a turning point in military cooperation between Israel and Cyprus.

In addition, Cyprus conducted three joint exercises in Israel in early 2018, while the IDF conducted military exercises with the Cypriot military in December 2018 and then again in December 2019. During the latter exercise, IDF Chief of General Staff Aviv Kochavi travelled to Cyprus to visit the exercise where he met with his Cypriot counterpart, Lieutenant General Ilias Leontaris, Chief of the National Guard General Staff of the Republic of Cyprus. According to Christoforos Fokaides, the Cypriot Minister of Defence, "the aim of the exercises was to improve the operational capabilities of the National Guard by sharing expertise. The Cypriot army was at a good level and had efficient personnel."

The subsequent joint military exercises not only brought the two military forces closer together, but also improved their competence, cooperation and mutual understanding.

From Bilateral to Trilateral Cooperation

In November 2017, the first trilateral defence summit between Israel, Cyprus and Greece took place, which can be considered a milestone in trilateral relations. The defence ministers of all three countries met in Athens and discussed strengthening cooperation to promote maritime and energy security, terrorism, stability and peace in the Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus Defence Minister Fokaides stated that "Cyprus, Greece and Israel defend in this volatile and fragile region not just their common interests, but also the interests of Europe and, I would say, those of the international community in general." Fokaides added that, "Our vision is to gradually turn the wider region from a conflict zone to an area of peace, stability and cooperation." It seems, however, that Fokaides vision has only a small chance of

being realized at the end of 2019, as Turkey is gradually undermining a peaceful vision, which, according to Turkey, was aimed at marginalising and excluding Turkey in the region. It should be recalled that Israel, Greece and Cyprus are extremely suspicious of Turkey and, as a result, intend to strengthen their cooperation in the military and security field.

Trilateral security cooperation (also known as the Eastern Mediterranean Partnership or EastMed/MEP) encompasses counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, search-and-rescue, and maritime security. Souda Bay Naval Base in Greece and the UK bases in Cyprus known as Akrotiri, or the Western Sovereign Base Area (WSBA) and Dhekelia Cantonment, or the Eastern Sovereign Base Area (ESBA) are hubs for cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Pipeline Project

The growing military cooperation between Israel, Cyprus and Greece is based on the ambitious joint declaration signed by their political leaders in June 2017, which provided for cooperation between the three countries in areas such as energy, the economy, telecommunications, the environment and underseas.

On 2 January 2020, Israel, Greece and Cyprus signed agreement on gas pipeline that will transport gas from Israel, via Greek Cyprus to Greece and from there to the EU. The main hurdle to be overcome by the three countries is a pipeline route that passes through territorial waters to which Turkey claims to be entitled. Turkey and its new partner Libya have declared a new maritime border in the area, giving Erdogan a veto right. Tensions between Israel, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey are likely to arise here. It remains to be seen whether or not such tensions will lead to military conflict.

A Radar on Crete

Another spectre for Turkey is the Israeli plan to build an advanced long-range naval radar (known as Long Horizon over-the-horizon (OTH) radar system) on the Greek island of Crete to monitor the route of the planned natural gas pipeline. It is not known what type of Israeli OTH radar system will be used.

The Long Horizon OTH project was first developed during the visit of the Greek Minister of Defence Panos Komnenos to Israel in 2015, but was temporarily suspended due to Greece's deepening financial difficulties. The project, revived in

March 2019, would have the capacity to monitor most of Turkey's coasts. The installation of the Long Horizon OTH radar system in Crete, with its extensive coverage area superior to that of traditional radars, would give three partners a competitive advantage. Apart from its wide radar coverage, the new radar system also gives the missiles new capabilities in terms of target acquisition.



Photo: NASA

A satellite image of the Aegean Sea.

For decades, Greece and Turkey have been arguing over sovereignty and related rights in the Aegean Sea. The dispute has had a major impact on Greek-Turkish relations since the 1970s. On two occasions it led to crises that came close to the outbreak of military conflicts, in 1987 and early 1996.

With a series of UAVs, the radar system is capable of monitoring an area with a radius of 600 km. In other words, the entire region of Cyprus, part of the Aegean Sea extending to the Dardanelles, and the entire Aegean and Mediterranean region of Turkey. With this radar, Israel, Greece and Cyprus can monitor Turkish airspace and the movements of ships in the eastern Mediterranean around the clock. In the joint radar station, Israeli experts will carry out the first tasks and Greece will receive data collected by the radar. As soon as Greece's economic circumstances allow, Greece intends to acquire the radar equipment. It is not yet known whether Cyprus will buy the radar or not.

US Support

In March 2019, following a meeting with representative of Israel, Greece and Cyprus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo underscored US support for its trilateral mechanism for better cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The three countries agreed to strengthen regional cooperation and to defend themselves against external threats in the Eastern Mediterranean and wider Middle East. In September 2019, it was reported that a bipartisan bill (known as the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act) in the US Congress, and ratified by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, allowed the US to fully support the trilateral partnership of Israel, Greece and Cyprus through energy and defence cooperation initiatives and proposed lifting of the long-standing arms embargo on Cyprus. The bipartisan law was adopted on 19 December 2019.

Conclusion

In conclusion, trilateral military cooperation will continue in the coming years. Even if Israel is reluctant to engage militarily on the side of Greece and Cyprus against potential adversaries, the IDF must prepare plans for such action. At the same time, neither Greece nor Cyprus will wage war on Israel's side. Indeed, Israel does not expect its partners to support it militarily, since Israel conducts its wars on its own. It should be stressed, however, that security around the Mediterranean will keep all three countries united for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the implicit support of Israel is indeed crucial for the two countries.

Greece has gradually replaced Turkey as Israel's partner in NATO's multinational air and naval forces exercises and in the naval forces of Israel, Greece and the US navy exercise. In addition, despite protests from Turkey, Israel is increasingly

participating in NATO exercises on the Greek coast. The Israeli Greek air and sea exercises will continue, providing both sides with additional experience for operations in unknown terrain, whether in Israel or in Greece. Israeli Cypriot military exercises have improved the capabilities and readiness of the Cyprus military compared to the Turkish forces. Turkey has tacitly acknowledged this point. US and EU support for the construction of a gas pipeline from Israel via Greek Cyprus to Greece and from there to the EU puts Turkey under pressure. Whether Turkey will seek a military solution is beyond the scope of the article. Nevertheless, it can be said that Turkey will probably consider all the measures at its disposal.

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