

Syriza-led Greek government takes its place in US war drive alongside Israel

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Greece's "radical left" Syriza party is forging a close military alliance with Israel, one of Washington's key allies in the Middle East.

Last month, Greece's Syriza-led coalition government with the Independent Greeks signed an agreement with Israel and Cyprus pledging closer cooperation over their gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and other economic issues.

Crucially, the deal also pledges to strengthen cooperation on "counterterrorism." This is a euphemism for greater military and political cooperation with Israel, which is in line with the Obama administration's aim of overthrowing the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, so as to dominate the energy-rich Middle East and its broader aims of mobilising against Russia and China.

Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras billed the move as part of a new independent foreign and economic policy for Greece, which along with closer economic relations with Egypt and Iran, will make Greece a bridgehead between the Middle East and Europe. Greece "is being transformed, despite its economic problems, into a hub for developments in the crucial and fragile region of the South Eastern Mediterranean," he said. "It is being transformed into what it should always have been because of its geographical position: a bridge between East and West."

It would be more truthful to say that he is offering his services to US imperialism.

Syriza's manifesto in the January 2015 election included a promise to end previous governments' growing military links with Israel, as part of its declared support for the Palestinians. Two Syriza members had been aboard the Mavi Marmara flotilla, which attempted to break the blockade of Gaza in 2010. Instead, within days of taking office, Tsipras assured the Israeli ambassador to Athens that Greek-Israeli relations would not change following his election.

The latest agreement follows a series of bilateral meetings between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Tsipras in Tel Aviv, Nicosia and Athens. Tsipras had previously visited Tel Aviv twice in less than two months. The three leaders agreed to explore the possibility of constructing a pipeline to transport gas from Israel to Greece and then on to Europe, as well as connecting the electrical grids of all three countries.

A US Geological Survey published in 2010 estimated that the Levantine Basin, which straddles the maritime borders of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, contains an estimated 1.7 billion barrels of oil and 122 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas. In 2009 and 2010, Israel discovered gas reserves of 10 trillion cubic feet in the Tamar field, and 22 tcf in the Leviathan field, ensuring sufficient capacity for both its domestic needs and exports. In 2011, gas reserves were discovered in the Aphrodite field off the coast of Cyprus that are estimated to hold up to seven tcf.

Israel has agreed to sell gas to Jordan under an agreement that precludes Jordan from importing gas from Iran. Both Israel and Cyprus had signed agreements to sell gas to Egypt, which has become a net importer due to rising demand, falling gas output and attacks on its pipelines in Sinai by Islamist militants.

However, the collapse of oil and gas prices has called into question the viability of developing all these fields in isolation, as has the discovery of vast gas deposits in the Zohr gas field, situated within Egypt's maritime waters, necessitating close collaboration between Israel, Cyprus and Greece. The Zohr field is estimated to hold up to 30 tcf of gas, the largest discovered in the region, which would ensure Egypt's energy security and turn it into a regional natural gas hub. It is likely to scuttle Cypriot and Israeli plans to sell offshore gas to Egypt.

The tripartite agreement between Israel, Cyprus and

Greece also seeks to strengthen military and intelligence cooperation, with the three countries pledging “to work together to bolster stability and security in a region.”

Two days before the tripartite agreement, Israel’s Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon met his Greek counterpart Panos Kammenos, leader of the right-wing nationalist Independent Greeks, in Athens.

Following the meeting, Kammenos spoke of a “new period of a strategic, essential and mutually beneficial defence cooperation,” including “cooperation on military training and our joint exercises which take place in the region of the Mediterranean, in Israel and in Greece.”

The declaration is an extension of the military cooperation treaty that Kammenos signed in Israel last July. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel has only ever signed such an accord with the US. Under the agreement, Israeli pilots can train in Greece, a NATO member, enabling the Israeli military to gain access to the latest NATO equipment and thinking. Crucially, it provides the military framework for the growing cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus in exploiting the natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In July, Israeli helicopter pilots completed an unprecedented 11-day combat training exercise near Greece’s Mount Olympus, following an earlier exercise in which Israeli warplanes carried out extensive training missions in Greece.

Later in the year, Greece took part in a series of joint military exercises with Israel. The latest one involved the air forces of both countries, when Greek pilots carried out introductory flights over the Negev desert before participating in joint formations, practising attack missions and rescuing downed pilots.

To underscore US strategic interest in these moves, a report by the US Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), published in January 2015, called for “US security and military support” to its key allies in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Israel, over access to recent vast discoveries of regional oil and gas.

The region is rapidly becoming the focus of a “new scramble for the Eastern Mediterranean” in which the Syrian war is a part.

The SSI report notes that while these discoveries “have yet to translate into proven gas reserves,” the chief beneficiary is Israel, and it calls for Israel to play a key role in exporting gas to Washington’s allies, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey. It further notes the possibility of Israel piping gas to Turkey. This is believed to be Israel’s

preferred export solution and a factor in Tel Aviv’s agreement with Cyprus and Greece, which it sees as a means of pressuring Ankara to reach an agreement.

The US calculates that these arrangements would have the additional advantage of weaning Europe off its dependency on Russia for its energy needs, as well as limiting Greece and Cyprus’ trade and investment deals with Moscow.

The SSI report concluded that extensive US military involvement “may prove essential in managing possible future conflict” in case of “an eruption of natural resource conflict in the East Mediterranean,” as a result of the recent discovery of huge offshore gas discoveries. It would also be necessary to prevent regional encroachment by “emerging powers and potential new peace brokers such as Russia—which already entertains a strong interest in East Mediterranean gas developments—and notably China.”

Dore Gold, Director General of Israel’s Ministry of foreign Affairs, told Natural Gas Europe last December that the US was “the main bridesmaid” in Israel’s gas agreements with its neighbours.

Syriza’s alignment with Israel and its backer, Washington, follows on from its implementation of the European Union’s (EU) draconian austerity measures, with devastating consequences for Greek workers and their families in return for loans that are being used to shore up European banks. It is also implementing the EU’s brutal demands to deter refugees, ordering the army to the Aegean islands of Kos, Chios, Lesbos and Leros to construct the “hotspots” (internment camps where refugees are registered) ordered by the EU Commission.

It is now positioning itself as a direct military ally of US imperialism in schemes that can drag the entire Middle East and Europe into war.



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