



Weekly Briefing

Greece political briefing:
EU's and Greece's response to the Israel-Hamas conflict
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EU's and Greece's response to the Israel-Hamas conflict

Summary

The briefing presents the relations between the EU and Israel, as well as the Greek Israeli ties. Further, it analyses the stance of the EU and Greece towards the war between Israel and Hamas. Both the EU and Greece consider Israel as one of the main partners in the region and enjoy close cooperation. The terrorist attack of Hamas against Israel was condemned by all the member states of the EU, including Greece. The EU expressed its solidarity to Israel. Nevertheless, all the EU members states agreed that the military response of Israel in Gaza has caused a tremendous humanitarian crisis and the establishment of corridors for humanitarian aid to Palestine is urgent. The will of the EU is to play a more pro-active role as a factor of stability and mediate between the two parts in order to re-establish peace and security in the Eastern-Mediterranean. However, the different voices within the EU prevented it reaching agreements and taking decisive actions, which the situation demands. On the other hand, Greece's good relations with both Israel and the Arab world have enabled the country to mediate between the two parties, proving its important role in the region.

Introduction

The terrorist attacks organised by Hamas against Israel on the 7th of October caused the lives of more than 1200 Israelis as well as the kidnapping of over 200 people. The EU immediately expressed its solidarity to Israel and condemned the attack. Moreover, the EU underscored the right of Israel to defend itself, in line with international law. Israel's response by using military force in Gaza Strip has raised concerns. EU member states agreed that the establishment of humanitarian aid corridors is urgent. However, during voting the UN resolution urging cease-fire in Gaza the EU member states did not vote the same way. France and others supported cease-fire. Germany, among others abstained and Hungary among others voted against. Greece was one of the countries that abstained, proving its balanced stance towards the crisis in the Middle East. Historically Greece had close ties with the Arab world. Moreover, during the last decade the country has cultivated close relations and cooperation with Israel. It is for the best interest of Greece, as part of the region, to exist in a peaceful

neighbourhood. Thus, the country has both, the incentive as well as the means to mediate between Israel and Palestine. The Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be solved with an easy solution but as the Greek PM stated the “fastest way” is the best way.

EU-Israel relations

Even before the Treaty of Rome -signed in 1957- which created the European Economic Community, Israel was engaged in a dialogue with the then European Coal and Steel Community. In April 1958 Israel was the third country, after the US and Greece to establish a diplomatic mission in Brussels. However, despite this early stage of relations, the EU and Israel came close much later. In particular, in 1981 the EU Delegation was established in Israel. Since then, the two parts have increased cooperation in many fields such as economy, trade, science, culture etc. and the political and economic cooperation agreements reached during the last five decades have cemented the EU-Israel relationship (1). Hence, the relation between them have extended significantly, making it one of the most wide-ranging and deep relationships that the EU enjoys with a third country.

Political relations are based in the EU-Israel Association Agreement which entered into force in 2000. This agreement includes among others the provision on political dialogue, on freedom of establishment and liberalisation of services, the free movement of capital and the strengthening of social and economic cooperation. Moreover, an important element of the agreement is the respect for human rights and democratic principles. The relations are highlighted by the 2005 Action Plan, under the European Neighbourhood policy, aiming to gradually integrate Israel to the European Policies and programmes (1). In particular, via the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU provides political and financial assistance to Israel. The amount of EU’s funds, provided to Israel by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), accounts for 1.8 mil. euros per year and is mainly used for twinning and public administration projects in areas of education, water management and telecommunication. Under the EU’s Multinational Financial Framework for the period 2021-2027 the EU will adopt a new financial cooperation instrument which is called the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) that will replace the ENI, contributing to the future EU-Israel cooperation (2).

Economic relations and trade are governed by a Free Trade Area agreement, which is part of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The main economic agreements between the EU and

Israel are: agreement on agriculture and fisheries which greatly improved market access (entered into force in 2010); the “Open Skies” agreement (entered into force in 2018), which liberalized the EU-Israel air travel; the Eurocontrol association agreement (entered into force in 2016) which is related to the “Open Skies” agreement and lastly the agreement of Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACCA) (entered into force in 2013), which brings mutual recognition of pharmaceutical certification. Furthermore, the EU supports Israel in aligning its legislation with the EU *acquis* via Twinning and TAIEZ instruments, especially in the fields such as food safety. Moreover, it is worth noting that the EU is the largest trade market of Israel (1). Specifically, the Israeli exports in goods to the EU accounted for 28.8% in 2022, imports from the EU to Israel reached 31.9%. Israel is the 25th biggest trade partner of the EU, representing 0,8% of its trade in goods in 2022 and it is among the main trading partners of the EU in the Mediterranean. Concerning other sectors of cooperation, Israel benefits from the Erasmus+, a programme of the EU to support and strengthen education, youth sports and training. In addition, in 2014 Israel signed the agreement to participate in the Horizon 2020 programme, associated to the EU Research and Technological Development Framework Programmes (2).

However, the thriving economic relationship and partnership has not always translated into the political level. The initial aspirations of Israel to become a full member of the European Economic Community did not materialize but rather a tailor-made approach of integration was developed throughout the years. This approach on the one hand deepens the cooperation and benefits both parts, but on the other leaves no room for a specific end goal and vision for the future of the relations. In addition, the non-inclusion of Hezbollah in the EU’s terrorist list is a source of bitterness for Israel, which undermines the political relations. In particular, the EU in 2013 included the military arm of Hezbollah on its sanctioned terrorist organization list but not the political party (3). Israel calls to include both the military and political wing to the EU’s terrorist list, which is something that have not yet been done. This instance as well the EU position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -despite EU’s full commitment to the existence and survival of Israel- raised the mistrust of Israel towards EU as a key player to the security and stability of the region. Consequently, Israel has curved an autonomous external policy, since the country largely perceives Europe to be hostile to Israel’s fundamental national rights (4).

Greek Israeli relations

Greece is a full member of the EU. As such, Greece also recognises Israel's right to exist and to be committed to democratic principles, including the rule of law. During the last decade Greece has emerged as a key supporter of Israel in the region. However, this was not always the case. During the Cold War, Greece and Israel had not yet developed full diplomatic relations and Greece followed a more pro-Palestinian policy. In particular, in 1947 Greece was the only European country to vote against the UN partition plan, which endorsed Jewish statehood. In 1949 Greece recognized Israel but the relations remained on ice until the 2000s. Greece' stance towards Israel could be explained in consideration of the Cyprus issue, as well as its economic ties with the Arab world. Athens feared that Arab and Muslim states could line-up and vote against Greece's interest in the UN. Hence, Greece adopted a more pro-Palestine external policy which would satisfy the Arab public opinion (5). During the 70s the Greek governments expressed their solidarity with the Palestinians.

Although some improvement in the relations with Israel occurred during the following years, the actual turning point in the Greek-Israel relations was in 2010, when the then Greek PM George Papandreou and the Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu met in Moscow in the framework of official meetings with the Russian leadership. A few months later Papandreou visited Jerusalem and met with his Israeli counterpart. Netanyahu also met with Papandreou in Athens, the following month. In 2012 Netanyahu became the first Israeli PM to visit Nicosia. Since then, the cooperation drastically increased especially in sectors such as defence, security, trade, investment and tourism (5). This turn in the external policy of the two countries could be explained by the will of Israel to find new alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean, following the deterioration of the relations with Turkey in 2008, as well as the need of Greece to find new economic partners in the region, following its debt crisis.

Unexpectedly enough the relations have improved further during the administration of the leftist party SYRIZA, despite the stance of its leader, Alexis Tsipras, while the party was in opposition. The conservative ND party, while in power, further improved the relations. In January 2023, the Greek MFA Nikos Dendias, was the first MFA of an EU member state to visit Jerusalem since the formation of the new Israeli government. Hence, nowadays the bilateral partnership is stronger than ever. Israeli increasingly participating in the Greek privatization programmes and the performance of common military exercises. Moreover, energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the trilateral partnership between Greece,

Cyprus and Israel are helping the bilateral relations even more (6). Energy Projects such as the EastMed Pipeline, a 1900km natural gas pipeline project to connect the gas reserves of eastern Mediterranean to Greece, stands out.

Bilateral trade is also blooming. In 2022 trade between Greece and Israel reached 1.37 bil euros, 45.8% increase compared to the preceding year. Greek imports rose 54.9% in year to year, from 548.7 mil euros in 2021 to 850 mil euros in 2022. Exports from Israel to Greece increased by 33% in 2022 and reached 523 mil euros, from 393 mil euros in 2021. It should be mentioned that according to the Greek-Israeli Chamber of Commerce, Greece exports to Israel were mainly petrochemical products, steel pipes and copper, cables, aluminium equipment and construction materials. Greece also exports vegetables, cooking oils, seafood, fruits, yogurt, baking goods and nuts. Israel mainly exports to Greece scrap metals, paper, plastics, fertilizers, pesticides and petroleum products (7).

EU's stance to the conflict

Following the terrorist attack organised by Hamas against Israel on the 7th of October 2023 and the atrocities of the terrorists resulting to the tragic death of more than 1,200 Israelis and the kidnapping of more than 200 children, women and men by Hamas, all EU member states expressed their solidarity with Israel and supported its right to defence. Leaders of major EU states and foreign ministers such as Germany, France and Italy immediately expressed their support to Israel and conducted visits in the country. In addition, both the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, as well as the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, visited Israel in order to express solidarity with the victims and meet with the Israeli leadership (8).

President Von Den Leyen, following her visit to Kfar Azza, one of the communities that was worst hit by Hamas made a public statement condemning the terrorist attack of Hamas. She stated that "Israel has a right to defend itself. In fact, it has the duty to defend its people. And we must call by their name the atrocities committed by Hamas. This is terrorism. This is an act of war. Nothing can justify what Hamas did". Nevertheless, she further mentioned "Let me also be very clear that Hamas alone is responsible for what is happening. Hamas' acts have nothing to do with the legitimate aspiration of the Palestinian people. On the contrary, the horror that Hamas has unleashed is only bringing more suffering upon innocent Palestinians. They are threatened, too. Hamas' despicable actions are the hallmark of terrorists. And I know that how

Israel responds will show that it is a democracy”. Furthermore, the President of the Commission in her statement referred to the will of Europe to keep working for a peaceful and integrated Middle East and work closely with Israel and with the countries in the region for stability. She also mentioned that antisemitic incidents are on the rise across Europe, especially through online fake news and hate speech, which is unacceptable and worrying, as she stated. Von den Leyen stated that the EU has put a strong fight against anti-Semitism in Europe and that now is the time to stand together to fight this phenomenon (9).

Europe’s unprecedented support for Israel, since the first moment of the Hamas atrocities, has been underlined by the clear statement that Europe strongly supports Israel’s right to defend itself in line with humanitarian and international law (10). Thus, the right of Israel to defend itself does not permit to cross the lines of the international law. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, after the military response of Israel stated that the following acts of Israel in Palestine are against international law. He stated that “We mourn also Palestinian children who are innocent victims of this conflict” and added “Speaking out against one tragedy should not prevent us from speaking out against another” (11).

The EU agreed to send humanitarian aid to Gaza, which is estimated to reach 75 mil euros in total (12). The EU leaders also called for “corridors and pauses” for the needed humanitarian aid to reach Gaza. However, the Foreign Ministers of the 27 member states of the EU agreed to the “immediate pauses in hostilities and the establishment of humanitarian corridors” but could not reach a unanimous agreement for a total cease-fire. France, Spain, Belgium and Ireland has called for a total cease of fire but Germany argued that this could work as a benefit for Hamas and undermines the Israel’s right to self-defense. This is evident to the statement of German MFA Annalena Baerbock: “How can the demand for a cease-fire acutely and now, in this terrible situation, ensure that Israel’s security is guaranteed?” (13).

It should be mentioned that the EU has decided to take a more active role to resolve the conflict. As Borrell stated, “The way we deal with this crisis will define the EU’s credibility and global role for years to come”. He argued that even if the two-state solution is distant and difficult, it is the only solution, and the EU must put all its political energy into achieving it (11). The EU’s statement in the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly points out that the EU aims to work with both parties, as well as partners in the region and the international community towards the reopening of meaningful negotiations to achieve a just

and lasting peace in the region. The EU through its statement reaffirmed that a two-state solution is the only way to achieve progress on the ground (14).

The Greek stance to the conflict

As already mentioned, Greece during the last decade enjoys close relations with Israel and is one of its key supporters in the region and the EU. On the other hand, historically, Greece has cultivated close ties with the Arab world as well. In addition, Greece, as a member of NATO and the EU, as well as a key partner of the US in the region can play an active role and engage with both sides. In addition, the security and stability of the Eastern Mediterranean region is of a great importance for the country, making the de-escalation of the conflict a key diplomatic priority of the government in order to avoid a further deterioration of the conflict and any spillover effects.

Following the 7th of October, on a diplomatic front, Greece has taken a clear position against the terrorist attack. On the same day the Greek Foreign Ministry made a statement via social media and declared “Greece strongly condemns today’s launch of heavy rocket attacks from Gaza against Israel. Greece stands with Israel and is deeply concerned by this unacceptable escalation of violence” (15). On the 23rd of October Mitsotakis met with Netanyahu in Jerusalem. The Greek PM expressed his grief and condemned the terrorist attack. In addition, he underscored the right of Israel to self-defense, in accordance with the international law. Specifically, he stated “From the first moment, Greece defended and supported Israel’s right to self-defense, according to international law. We made a very clear distinction between Hamas and the Palestinian people. We will continue to support you and hope that whatever happens must happen without great humanitarian cost. You can count on our support, our help”. The Israeli PM conveyed his appreciation for solidarity and stated that “It is a battle of civilization against barbarism. We are on the side of civilization, and we must all unite against Hamas, which is the Islamic State (ISIS)” (16).

On the 27th of October the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in Gaza. Only four EU countries voted against the resolution. Greece abstained, as 14 other EU countries including Germany Italy and Cyprus. France, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain voted in favour. Greek diplomatic sources noted that the abstention is in no way equivalent to a vote against and argued that Greece

remained consistent in its principled foreign policy maintaining a balanced stance and for this reason it abstained from voting on the approval of a related draft resolution of Arab countries within the framework of the UN (17).

It is worth noting that the Greek MFA George Gerapetritis on the 16th of November visited Ramallah, in the West Bank, and met with Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and PM Mohammad Staiyeh. During the meeting the Greek MFA stressed that the need for humanitarian pause to allow sustainable humanitarian corridors to be established in Gaza is urgent (18). After concluding this meeting Gerapetritis met with his Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen at the Israeli foreign ministry. The Greek MFA discussed the situation in the region and conveyed the Palestinian side's concerns about the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza (19). After the two meetings Gerapetritis at an interview with Reuters mentioned that Greece is an honest mediator in the Middle East. He stated "I am in constant communication with both sides and I am relatively optimistic that we could have some positive results soon" emphasising once again the important role of Greece as a key player of stability in the region.

Conclusion

Greece is the closest ally of Israel in the EU and has emerged as a key supporter of Israel in the region. In parallel, the country enjoys good relations with the Arab world. Following the terrorist attack of Hamas, Athens stood by the side of Israel, condemned the attack and supported the right of Israel to defend itself. The same was agreed in the EU level. The EU supports Israel's right to defend, within the boundaries of the international law. The military response of Israel in Gaza has caused concerns of the major humanitarian crisis and both Greece and the EU had called for the establishment of corridors for humanitarian aid to be sent to Gaza. The EU wants to mediate between Israel and Palestine and proposes solutions that will re-establish peace, such as the two-state solution. The visits of the Greek MFA to both Israel and West Bank, evidently show the efforts of Athens to mediate between the two parts in order to accelerate a possible re-establishment of peace in the region. Both the EU and Greece need to focus their political energy and power to build a lasting peace in Eastern Mediterranean

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