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A Strategic Friendship: Israeli Perceptions of the Israel-Cyprus Relationship

YONATAN BRANDER

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Hausmanns gate 7
PO Box 9229 Oslo
NO-0134 OSLO, Norway
Tel. +47 22 54 77 00
Fax. +47 22 54 77 01
Web: www.prio.no



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Over the past decade, Israel-RoC relations have improved dramatically.¹ Jump-started by a shared concern over regional in/stability during the Arab Spring, a mutual desire to profit from discovery of large off-shore gas reserves in the Mediterranean, and the souring of Israel-Turkey relations, cooperation between the neighbors has rapidly become a major geopolitical reality in the Eastern Mediterranean. While others have discussed the emergence and nature of this new alignment, the present paper focuses on how viewed by the Israeli elites view the Israel-RoC relationship. Using media reports, parliamentary protocols, government statements, and other open-source materials, the paper examines how Israeli elites perceive the importance, nature and future of their strong relationship with the Republic of Cyprus. Understanding elite Israeli perceptions of their country's relationship with Cyprus is valuable for several important reasons. First, it gives us a better understanding of Israel's perspective on the current state of play in the region and its strategic posture. Second, it gives Cypriots an insight into how Israeli leaders see them and the RoC. This is useful for recognizing misperceptions about the relationship, recognizing areas of alignment and misalignment, and navigating threats to the warming partnership. Third, over the past several years, many analysts have raised the important question of what will happen to the partnership if certain geopolitical realities change, or if the economic rewards of cooperation in the energy arena prove disappointing. Some have claimed that Jerusalem may decide to prioritize its growing relationships with Arab countries over ties with Cyprus, or that a flare-up of Israeli-Palestinian tensions might trigger a crisis with Cyprus that sours relations. Others have argued that if a meaningful rapprochement with Ankara is possible, Israel may quickly realign itself with Turkey even if doing so harms its relationship with Cyprus. And, from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, when looking at the future resilience of the relationship, it is useful to consider evolving Israeli elite perceptions of its nature and import.

The paper demonstrates that top Israeli leaders across the political spectrum have increasingly come to see Cyprus as a loyal friend, cultural kin with shared values and experiences, and a partner for advancing a more pluralistic vision for the region. It notes the benefits derived from improved day-to-day cooperation and cultural exchanges with Cyprus in a host of other areas. Further, it notes the degree to which Israeli leaders have deepened their commitment to partnering with Cyprus in the areas that brought them together in the first place. At the same time, it catalogs the extent to which Israeli elites have come to appreciate the friendship as an asset in advancing some of their other diplomatic, economic, and strategic objectives. More generally, top Israelis see the friendship with Cyprus as a major cornerstone in the architecture of the regional order that Israel is trying to promote. It also notes areas of weakness in the relationship, as well as the varying levels of support for the relationship amongst the broader Israeli public. Indeed, one of the primary takeaways from the paper is that while Israeli foreign policy elites believe that the basis of the relationship is strong and getting stronger, many in Israeli politics - including lawmakers - have very little appreciation for why and in what ways the relationship is important.

Bilateral Israel-RoC relations are closely intertwined with the trilateral Israel-Cyprus-Greece partnership - a diplomatic framework initiated by Cyprus and Greece.² And, in years since, Israel has fully participated in the arrangement. While this might create a challenge for researchers looking to isolate Israel-Cyprus relations, it is also vital to recognize that this trilateral arrangement is a feature of the partnership. And,

¹ For stylistic reasons, throughout the paper Cyprus is used to refer to the RoC and Cypriots refer to Greek Cypriots.

² On various aspects of the trilateral framework see: Zenonas Tziarras (2016) "Israel-Cyprus-Greece: a 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance", *Mediterranean Politics*, 21:3, 407-427, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2015.1131450; Zenonas Tziarras (2018) "The Eastern Mediterranean: Between Power Struggles and Regionalist Aspirations, *Re-imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report*, 2. Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre; Zenonas Tziarras (2019) "Cyprus's Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Trilateral Partnerships: A Neoclassical Realist Approach" in Tziarras, Zenonas ed. *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security. Re-imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report*, 3. Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 53-72.

in truth, even when Israeli leaders issue statements referring to meetings with only with their Cypriot counterparts, they make sure to mention the trilateral framework. For example, in both 2016 and 2018, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein welcomed the President of the House of Representatives of Cyprus to the Knesset by talking about bilateral cooperation and “strategic alliance” between the three states.³ In November 2018, after meeting with Demetris Syllouris, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin made it clear that “relations with Cyprus are important on the bilateral and the trilateral levels.”⁴ This language, which is broadly representative of how Israeli leaders refer to the relationship, denotes that there are some areas where they work more closely with Cyprus, and others with Greece; however, the management of bilateral relationships is largely ordered as part of a trilateral diplomatic framework that is becoming increasingly formalized. Importantly, relationships among partners in diplomatic triangles are not always perfectly equal. And, in this case, Israel recognizes that there is no chance and nothing to gain by trying to place itself between Greece and Cyprus. Instead, it believes that building ties with them individually and as a pair not only serves the best interests of the two countries that offered the arrangement, but also serves Israel’s best interests.

It is worth noting that, while Israeli-Cyprus-Greece meetings are frequent, fruitful, and have increasingly been featured in the media, they tend not to capture the imagination of the Israeli political class and the Israeli public in the same way as the diplomatic trips to Washington or to Arab states in the region. This is understandable for many reasons. However, at the same time, it does reflect a reality that is unfamiliar to many in the Israeli public and politics: the strengthening of ties with Cyprus and the increasing formalization of the trilateral alignment.

Israel-Cyprus Relations in the Domestic Political Conversation

As observers have noted, one of the best ways to conceptualize recent Israeli domestic politics is to look at the shifting attitudes towards the leadership of now-former Prime Minister Netanyahu—rather than examining the traditional left-right spectrum. This, of course, is especially valid considering that over the past five years Netanyahu’s government faced a series of coalition crises before collapsing in 2019, resulting in four national elections in just a two-year period. Moreover, in Israel—as Kissinger and others have long argued—because foreign policy and diplomacy are integral to day-to-day domestic politics, it is hardly surprising that discussions about Israel-RoC relations and the trilateral alliance are an important topic in Israeli domestic political discourse. And while many such discussions in the Knesset and other elite forums are deeply partisan in nature, if one looks closely at these exchanges they reveal a broad consensus amongst Israeli leaders in both camps about the vitality of the Israel-Cyprus relationship.

As concrete evidence of Netanyahu’s prodigious abilities to advance Israel’s interests on the global stage and proof of his unparalleled fitness as a leader, his supporters (as well as the PM himself) have frequently touted the example of strong Israel-Cyprus relations and the establishment Israel-Cyprus-Greece alliance, along with other foreign policy developments. For example, in early 2016, on the eve of bilateral head-of-state meetings with Cyprus and the first trilateral summit, Likud Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, who also acted as the government liaison to the Knesset, slammed members of the opposition for proposing a no-confidence measure. Should Israel “go to new elections,” he asked rhetorically, because they are “building a strategic alliance with Greece and Cyprus” or because they have started to “extract gas from the ground”

³ Proceedings of the 20th Knesset. (2016). “The 113th Meeting of the 20th Knesset.” (March 9, 2016). https://online.knesset.gov.il/PDF/51120/PDF_51120.PDF

⁴ “President Rivlin meets President of the House of Representatives of Cyprus.” (November 20, 2018). <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/president-rivlin-meets-president-of-the-house-of-representatives-of-cyprus>

as part of their energy cooperation with the Cypriots.⁵ Throughout the 20th Knesset, which lasted until 2019, Levin and others in that camp boasted of Netanyahu's success in forming strong ties with Cyprus and creating the trilateral alliance.

And, in several addresses to the Knesset as prime minister, Netanyahu pointed to his work on Israel-RoC relations as one of the crowning achievements of his time in office; indeed, in his final address as prime minister in the middle of 2021, he took credit for building friendships with "Eastern Mediterranean countries like Greece and Cyprus."⁶ During the elections and after, Netanyahu, members of his family, and others in his political orbit continued to boast about the improvement in Israel-Cyprus relations as one of his major triumphs; moreover, in recent months they have attacked the new government for squandering the gains he made in this area and claim, with no real basis, that Bennett and Lapid are planning to abandon the trilateral alliance in favor of rapprochement with Turkey.⁷

Netanyahu's political rivals do not see things in exactly the same way. But, significantly, the shift in rhetoric and perception of the relationship is revealing. As recently as four years ago, some members of the mainstream opposition downplayed the importance of meetings and agreements between Israeli and Cypriot leaders. For instance, in 2016, amidst a raucous Knesset debate about the Netanyahu government's successes, MKs Meir Cohen and Aliza Lavie, both members of the centrist *Yesh Atid* party, appeared to scoff at the very idea that friendly meetings between leaders of the two countries represented a major diplomatic achievement. Israel-RoC cooperation, they seemed to imply, was not vital to advancing Israel's status in the world.⁸

Indeed, by 2019, when the country entered a period of repeated elections, the rival camp began to recognize the importance of the relationship and the benefits of the improved state of affairs in the Eastern Mediterranean; however, at the same time, they denied that Netanyahu was uniquely capable of building such ties and claimed that he was actually building upon already established levels of cooperation. This was not simply a change in tone. Yair Lapid, who has taken a hardline on Turkey, Erdogan, and others in his orbit, criticized the Netanyahu government for not going far enough in its embrace of Cypriot claims in the Mediterranean. In essence, there is a rapidly growing consensus amongst Israel's elites that assumes the Israel-Cyprus relationship and the Israel-Cyprus-Greece alliance are vitally important to advancing Israel's interests. And, in the first weeks of 2022, this elite consensus could be seen in conversations surrounding the potential for a rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. Israeli leaders and experts repeatedly emphasized that improvements in relations with Ankara should not and would not come at the cost of ties with the RoC and Greece.⁹ Foreign Minister Lapid stressed that Jerusalem considered the trilateral alliance to be "of the utmost importance" to Israel.¹⁰

⁵ Proceedings of the 20th Knesset. (2016). "The 109th Meeting of the 20th Knesset." (February 29, 2016). https://online.knesset.gov.il/PDF/50681/PDF_50681.PDF

⁶ "Full text: Netanyahu's Furious Final Speech after 12 years as Prime Minister." (June 18, 2021). *The Times of Israel* <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-netanyahus-furious-final-speech-after-12-years-as-prime-minister/>

⁷ See for example: Yair Netanyahu, "לפיד ובנט הורסים את מדיניות החוץ של ישראל," *Ice*, <http://www.ice.co.il/ice-team/news/article/833934>

⁸ Proceedings of the 20th Knesset. (2016). "The 109th Meeting of the 20th Knesset." (February 29, 2016). https://online.knesset.gov.il/PDF/50681/PDF_50681.PDF

⁹ Jonathan Lis, "Turkey Looks to Rehabilitate Ties, but Israel Remains Suspicious." *Haaretz* (January 21, 2022). <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-turkey-looks-to-rehabilitate-ties-but-israel-remains-suspicious-1.10555631>. Dan Schueftan, "Should Israel Reconcile with Erdogan." *Israel HaYom* (February 1, 2022). <https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/should-israel-reconcile-with-erdogan/>

¹⁰ Anna Ahronheim, "Gantz meets with Greek counterpart, warns of continuing Iranian hostility" *Jerusalem Post* (January 20, 2022) <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-694058>

Cyprus as a Bridge to Europe and an Energy Partner

In recent years, Israeli elites have come to value Cyprus as a reasonably sympathetic voice in international forums; however, it is important to point out that Israeli leaders do not imagine that Cyprus will emerge as a powerful advocate for all of Jerusalem's positions, either in the EU or in other institutions. Rather, with few exceptions, they seem to recognize that Nicosia still has qualms about some of Israel's positions - in particular, on matters related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - and that they share the outlook of most other EU countries on many of those issues; moreover, they are familiar with the reality that Cyprus's position within the EU means that the island cannot shape European policies. Still, many Israeli elites, who have internalized the belief that Israel is unfairly demonized in Europe and around the world, see Cyprus as one of the few EU countries that is reliably sensitive to Israel's interests.

Furthermore, they believe that Cyprus has an interest in avoiding a major crisis in Israel-EU relations, and for this reason could act as an agent to mediate diplomatic disagreements and so avoid a break in cooperative ties between Israel and Europe. In June 2020, for example, in a brief meeting at Ben-Gurion Airport in the first months of the pandemic, FM Gabi Ashkenazi sought to assure Nikos Christodoulides, his Cypriot counterpart, that any moves by Israel to annex parts of the West Bank --as part of the Trump plan -- would be carried out in a responsible manner and in coordination with other actors; moreover, Ashkenazi asked Cyprus to help cool the EU's ire over the issue and "serve as a moderating voice in the discourse with European countries" on the matter.¹¹ This, of course, did not mean the Israelis expected Cyprus to parrot Jerusalem's position of the matter; rather, they hoped Nicosia could help prevent the topic from leading to a collapse in Israel-EU cooperation before any concrete moves had been made.

In other important ways, Israeli leaders recognize that Cyprus is a bridge to Europe and a springboard for their expanding interdependence with Europe. As early as the mid-1990s, Shimon Peres advocated for Cyprus's inclusion in the integrated European community because -- in large part -- he believed Israel would benefit from having the EU on its doorstep.

Today, this position is gaining ground, primarily through efforts to foster energy interconnectivity and interdependence. In fact, as some Israeli experts point out, while energy interdependence is an emergent reality that is highly dependent on natural resources and markets, Israel is clearly working hard to foster a high level of energy interdependence with Europe. The ambitious EuroAsia Interconnector project will not only link Israel to the Cyprus power grid and link Cyprus to Greece's power grid, but will also, by extension, link Israel to the EU power grid. Israeli experts have pointed out that Israeli leaders hope this will have positive diplomatic implications for them. And in the Israeli media this is routinely touted as a project designed to link Israel's vital infrastructure to that of the EU. The same, of course, can be said of the ambitious plans for an EastMed pipeline that would bring gas from Israel and Cyprus to Greece; besides, the vision is for that gas to be transported from Greece to Italy and other Western European markets. For Israel, the EastMed pipeline would act as another infrastructure project that creates real energy interdependence with the EU.

A defining element of Israeli elite perceptions of Cyprus is the sense that they are Israel's central partner or, at the very least, one of Israel's central partners in the exploitation of offshore natural gas and, potentially, the export of that gas to European markets; furthermore, Jerusalem perceives Nicosia as a friendly country seeking mutually beneficial cooperation in tapping into the economic, strategic, and other benefits of the offshore natural resources. In practice, this has meant that the two countries have worked

¹¹ "FM Ashkenazi meets with Cypriot FM Nikos Christodoulides" (June 23, 2020). *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2020/Pages/FM-Ashkenazi-meets-with-Cypriot-FM-Nikos-Christodoulides-23-June-2020.aspx>

closely together on shared interests and have been able to address conflicts without undermining the spirit of cooperation.

Over several years, Israeli leaders signaled that Cyprus, rather than Turkey, was their preferred collaborator in the natural gas arena. This was evident in their position on maritime boundaries and in the way they have worked with Cyprus and Greece in efforts to realize the ambitious and controversial EastMed gas pipeline. And while oftentimes disputes over rights to natural resources and maritime boundaries lead countries to regard each other with distrust and hostility, the dispute between Israel and Cyprus over the Aphrodite field has been settled amicably and, in fact, Israeli leaders have largely acted in a way that conveys understanding of Cyprus's interests. For instance, Israel's willingness to swiftly address and accommodate Cyprus in this dispute arose from its recognition that Aphrodite was the source of the bulk of Cyprus's offshore gas; thus, a quick resolution to the field's future and moves to advance exploration efforts there were understood as far more important for Nicosia's interests.¹² Admittedly, in recent weeks, serious doubts about the viability of the EastMed pipeline project and the warming of Israel-Turkey relations have raised new possibilities and questions. Still, Israeli leaders appear committed to working with Greece and Cyprus as partners in the energy sector; more, they seem to hope to bring Turkey into the extant frameworks for regional cooperation.¹³ In other words, while Turkey may be looking to cut Greece and the RoC out of the deal, Israel seems intent on trying to bring Turkey into a multilateral arrangement.

Cyprus as an Ally

Historically, Israel has avoided taking a position on the conflict between Cyprus and Turkey over the northern part of the island; however, in recent years, Jerusalem has become more and more outspoken in its support for Nicosia on these matters. As part of its agreements with Cyprus and other countries, Israel has rejected Turkey's competing maritime claims in the Mediterranean and, importantly, has refuted Ankara's claim that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is a sovereign entity with its own maritime rights. In July 2021, in a sign that Jerusalem's deepening relationship with Cyprus was leading it to take a more outspoken position on the matter, Israel's Foreign Ministry slammed "unilateral" Turkish actions aimed at shifting the status quo on the island by reopening the "ghost" (uninhabited since 1974) town of Varosha. At the height of the crisis over Varosha, Israel warmly welcomed FM Nikos Christodoulides for a series of meetings with FM Lapid, President Herzog, and other Israeli officials. And, in the context of his meeting with Christodoulides, Lapid publicly declared that Israel shared Cyprus's "deep concern regarding Turkey's provocative actions;" more, he said that they would work together on a response to Ankara's move. Israel's strong support for Cyprus on the issue appears to have pleased both Nicosia and Athens. And the Greek and Cypriot governments thanked Jerusalem for its strong backing.¹⁴

¹² "Minister Steinitz and his Cypriot Counterpart Reach Agreement on the Aphrodite-Yishai's Dispute." *Israel Ministry of Energy* (March 10, 2021). https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/press_090321; Zaken, Danny. "Israel-Cyprus Gas Talks Disappoint Isha'i Partners." *Globes* (May 2, 2021). <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-israel-cyprus-gas-talks-disappoint-ishai-partners-1001369451>

¹³ Lahav Harkov, "Herzog in talks for first Israeli presidential visit to Turkey since 2007." *Jerusalem Post* (January 18, 2022). <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-693898>. Muhdan Saglam, "Can Israeli gas bridge Turkey-Israel rift?" *Al-Monitor* (January 21, 2022) <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/could-new-israeli-gas-pipeline-bridge-long-standing-rift-turkey>.

¹⁴ Jonathan Lis, "Israel Stands with Cyprus in Dispute with Turkey over Abandoned Town, Foreign Ministry Says." *Haaretz* (July 21, 2021). <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/israel-stands-with-cyprus-in-dispute-with-turkey-over-abandoned-town-lapid-says-1.10016024>; "FM Lapid meets with Cypriot FM Nikos

Importantly, while Israel's unwillingness to take a strong stance on the Cyprus issue is closely connected to the implied parallel between the Cypriot territorial conflict and the Israel-Palestine one, Jerusalem has nonetheless increasingly embraced Nicosia's preferred negotiated one-state solution even as there is no political appetite amongst Israeli elites for a similar resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli elites are increasingly considering Nicosia a potential friend in their efforts to counter Iran (a country that has diplomatic relations with Cyprus) and Iranian-backed proxies in the region. The reasoning behind this is understandable: Cyprus would be a valuable voice against Teheran in a European community that Israel perceives as being too friendly with Iran. Furthermore, from a strategic perspective, Israel has become increasingly concerned over Iranian activity in the Mediterranean, while in the last two years the maritime element of the shadow conflict between Israel and Iran has become more pronounced, and Israel is hoping to deny Teheran the ability to transport munitions to proxy groups through the Syrian port of Latakia.¹⁵ Israel has also intensified efforts to police the Mediterranean waters in order to prevent Iranian supplies, weapons, and technologies from reaching Gaza as well as Hezbollah and other militant groups in the region; further, according to recent reports, Israel is routinely targeting Teheran's economy by confronting tankers bringing Iranian oil to Syria via the Mediterranean.¹⁶ There is no doubt that these efforts would have greater impact and legitimacy if Israel had Cypriot backing or cooperation on the issue. Israel's desire to win Cyprus's support in their efforts against Teheran is apparent in several ways. First, Israeli leaders have gradually introduced rhetoric about the Iranian threat into bilateral and trilateral dialogues. For instance, in April 2021, at a summit meeting, FM Gabi Ashkenazi said that one of the things that the leaders focused on was the "challenges" posed by Iran and Hezbollah to regional stability and peace.¹⁷ In August 2021, Defense Minister Benny Gantz's meeting with Cypriot Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulides focused on "Iranian entrenchment in the region," the threats it posed to "international trade, freedom of navigation and human lives," and the "need for a united international front against growing Iranian aggression."¹⁸

Second, in Israeli media and political publications, we can note a focus on the idea that Cyprus is becoming more involved in the effort to contain Iran. For example, reports from the April 2021 summit--as well as others-- emphasized the notion that Nicosia was more or less in agreement with Israel that Teheran poses a major threat to the region. The headline in one Israeli newspaper highlighted the countries' shared

Christodoulides." *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (July 2021). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2021/Pages/FM-Lapid-meets-with-Cypriot-FM-Christodoulides-27-July-2021.aspx>

¹⁵Judah Ari Gross, "Israel said to strike key Syrian port of Latakia, causing 'massive' damage." *Times of Israel* (December 21, 2021). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-airstrikes-said-to-hit-key-syrian-port-of-latakia-causing-massive-damage/> Seth Frantzman "The Latakia doctrine puts Russia in a bind" *Jerusalem Post* (December 29, 2021). <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-690061>

¹⁶ Farzin Nadimi, "Iran and Israel's Undeclared War at Sea (Part 2): The Potential for Military Escalation." The Washington Institute: *PolicyWatch* 3470. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-and-israels-undeclared-war-sea-part-2-potential-military-escalation>. Kingsley, Patrick, et al. "Israel's Shadow War With Iran Moves Out to Sea." *The New York Times* (March 26, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/26/world/middleeast/israel-iran-shadow-war.html>

¹⁷ "FM Ashkenazi Attends Quadrilateral Strategic-Regional Meeting of Foreign Ministers in Cyprus." *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (April 16, 2021). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2021/Pages/FM-Ashkenazi-attends-quadrilateral-strategic-regional-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-16-April-2021.aspx>.

¹⁸ "Gantz Discusses Iranian Entrenchment with Cypriot Foreign Minister." *i24 News* (August 22, 2021). <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1629658653-gantz-discusses-iranian-entrenchment-with-cypriot-foreign-minister>

“concern with Iranian aggression.”¹⁹ And, likewise, in 2018, the Israeli press excitedly reported comments by President Nicos Anastasiades as saying that an “Iranian threat to Israel [is] also threat to Cyprus;”²⁰ though, in truth, he meant that Cyprus, as result of geographic closeness, would suffer fallout from an attack on Israel. In policy papers for leading think-tanks, Israeli experts have, likewise, argued that Jerusalem was looking to Nicosia and Athens for support against Iran.²¹

Third, Israel may be looking to better convince Cyprus to take a stand against Iran. Israel, experts note, routinely overplays the connection between Turkey and Iran. This may be, in part, in an effort to sway the Cypriots to be more forceful in their opposition to Iran. For a recent example, Israel accused Iran of masterminding a (foiled) plot to kill Israeli businesspeople in Nicosia. After initial reports that the plot was an intended criminal hit on a specific businessman, Prime Minister Bennett’s office issued a statement that called it “terrorism... directed by Iran against Israeli businessmen who live in Cyprus.”²² Though, reportedly, Cypriot authorities now agree that it was a terrorist plot, they remain skeptical of Israel’s claim that Teheran is to blame. However, regardless of who is ultimately responsible, Israel’s quick and public blaming of Iran for the plot was not only designed to shame Teheran in the international community, but also to convince Cypriots that Iran is a threat to their interests and is willing to conduct malevolent activities within the borders of Cyprus. Likewise, it is possible that when some in the Israeli government blamed Iranian negligence or malice for a massive oil spill in the Mediterranean in 2021, they were trying to sway Cyprus to see the wide-ranging and deleterious effects of Iranian activities in the region.

Israel considers Cyprus to be its backyard and part of its vital strategic hinterland.²³ And, as the result of agreements arranged both through bilateral negotiations and within the trilateral framework, Cyprus permits and even encourages Israel to use the island as a base for its forces. Israeli jets, naval vessels, and ground troops are routinely present in Cyprus not only for operational reasons and training exercises, but also as a sign of Israel’s commitment to Cypriot security. Cyprus regularly participates alongside Israel in military exercises in the Mediterranean and in the respective countries. In April 2021, for instance, as part of the IDF command’s “War Month,” Israel and Cyprus conducted a two-day air defense exercise in Cyprus. Another example is that the trilateral allies also drill together in the Israeli-led “Noble Dina” naval exercise. And, this past year, that exercise was expanded to include France.

In recent years, Israel and Israeli military contractors have begun to work with Cyprus to boost Israel’s own military capabilities. In 2019, Cyprus purchased Israeli-made drones to monitor its territorial waters

¹⁹ Itamar Eichner, “First Summit of Israel, UAE, Greece, and Cyprus: “Concern with Iranian Aggression.” [In Hebrew] *Ynet* (April 16, 2021). <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/SkhuLBwUO>

²⁰ “EXCLUSIVE: Cypriot President says Iranian threat to Israel also threat to Cyprus.” *I24 News* (May 8, 2018). <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/174204-180508-exclusive-cypriot-president-says-iranian-threat-to-israel-also-threat-to-cyprus>

²¹ Orna Mizrahi, “Israel’s Policy in its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus.” *Strategic Assessment* (July 2020) <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Israels-Policy-in-its-Triangular-Relations-with-Greece-and-Cyprus.pdf>

²² “Bennett’s office says Iranian terror targeted Israeli businessmen in Cyprus.” *The Times of Israel*. (October 4, 2021). https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/bennetts-office-blames-iranian-terror-for-targeting-of-israeli-tycoon-in-cyprus/.

²³ “Major Potential in Israel-Cyprus Friendship: Policy Paper Based on a Meeting of Israel in the Mediterranean Working Group.” Mitvim: The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies. *Mitvim* (August 2021). <https://mitvim.org.il/en/publication/major-potential-in-the-israel-cyprus-friendship-from-the-israel-and-the-mediterranean-working-group/>.

and those of the EEZ amidst tensions with Turkey.²⁴ And, in November 2021, Israel and Cyprus signed a deal to construct land surveillance systems on the island amidst another flare-up in Cypriot-Turkish relations.²⁵ There have even been talks of bringing Iron Dome systems to Cyprus.²⁶

Israel and Cyprus are both founding members of the EastMed Gas Forum. They have recently included the UAE in meetings and have discussed expanding the trilateral meetings to include others; they have also cooperated in other multilateral frameworks. These not only represent the further institutionalization of the relationship, but also indicate that Israel has increasingly come see its relationship with Cyprus (and the broader trilateral relationship) as the cornerstone of a regional order that it is interested in shaping and preserving. In September 2021, FM Yair Lapid wrote that the new government's first one-hundred days had included the "renew[al]" of the "Hellenic Alliance" with Cyprus and Greece as part of a broader framework that Israel is working on "extending...to the Balkans," and which included "our new friends in the Gulf."²⁷ In a meeting with his counterparts from Cyprus and Greece, Lapid said the friendships and the "trilateral alliance" were "a key part of something bigger;" namely, a collection of "moderate and pragmatic" countries in Mediterranean and Middle East.²⁸ In other contexts, Lapid has spoken of the ties as a cornerstone of the "circle of life" that Israel is looking to advance in the region; in fact, leaders of the other two countries have picked up on this language as well.²⁹

Cyprus as a Fellow Democracy and a Good Neighbor

Many Israeli elites see the strength of the Israel-Cyprus relationship and, more broadly, the Israel-Cyprus-Greece alignment as a by-product of something more than shared geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests; namely, they believe that an important basis of these friendships, including the bilateral Cyprus-Israel one, is the democracies' shared political and cultural values. They often point to this as the explanation for how, within a relatively short period of time, Israel and Cyprus-- two countries that used to have chilly bilateral ties—were able to develop a warm relationship and a strong ethic of cooperation.³⁰ In 2016, Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example, implied that overlapping interests, the discovery of natural gas offshore, and political shifts in the region may have opened the door for the rapprochement,

²⁴ "Cyprus buys Israeli drones to monitor waters amid Turkey natural gas tensions." *The Times of Israel* (October 7, 2019). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cyprus-buys-israel-drones-to-monitor-waters-amid-turkey-natural-gas-tensions/>.

²⁵ Seth Frantzman, "Israel's Elbit to make land surveillance system for Cyprus." *Defense News*. (November 20, 2021). <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/techwatch/2021/11/08/israels-elbit-to-make-land-surveillance-system-for-cyprus/>; "Israel Ministry of Defense signs defense agreement with the Cypriot Ministry of Defense." *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. (November 4, 2021). <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/israel-mod-signs-defense-agreement-with-cypriot-mod-4-november-2021>

²⁶ Uri Rodrigues-Garcia and Dean S. Elmas, "Report from Greece: Cyprus on the Verge of Acquiring Iron Dome Batteries from Israel." *Israel Hayom*. (October 3, 2021). (Hebrew). <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/4840970>

²⁷ Yair Lapid, "Israel's First 100 Days of a Different Foreign Policy." *Haaretz*. (September 20, 2021) <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-israel-s-first-100-days-of-a-different-foreign-policy-1.10226176>.

²⁸ Yair Lapid statement at: "Trilateral Meeting: Israel, Greece, Cyprus" (August 22, 2021) <https://www.facebook.com/IsraelMFA/videos/261084585855028>

²⁹ Lazar Berman, "Lapid hosts Greek, Cypriot FMs, hails regional alliance." *The Times of Israel* (August 22, 2021). https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/lapid-hosts-greek-cypriot-fms-hails-regional-alliance/

³⁰ Orna Mizrahi, "Israel's Policy in its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus." *Strategic Assessment* (July 2020) <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Israels-Policy-in-its-Triangular-Relations-with-Greece-and-Cyprus.pdf>

stating further that it was “common values” that provided the firm foundations for meaningful cooperation between them and fueled the rapid improvement in the relationship once they headed down that path.³¹ More, while some have feared that Israel’s formalization of ties with the UAE and other regional actors might come at the expense of Israel-RoC relations, Israeli elites seem to perceive that there is a qualitative difference in those relationships compared to relationships between democracies. In other terms, they believe that such friendships are made of stronger stuff. Speaking of the roots of Israel’s burgeoning relationship with Greece and Cyprus, Netanyahu said that the countries were the only “democracies in the Eastern Mediterranean” and, as such, were bound by their shared commitment to the “ideas of pluralism, diversity, choice, debate.” Such commonalities, he emphasized, meant that when they began working together they were able to form “an immediate bond of friendship” and, in other contexts, he spoke about the “natural alliance of democracies.”³²

In 2018, at a summit with Greek and Cypriot leaders, Netanyahu again emphasized that the bonds between the states were rooted in “shared values,” their common sense of “deep histories and rich culture,” and their identities as “vibrant democracies” that “value pluralism, freedom, and peace;” more, the declaration from that summit echoed this idea when it stated: “Israel and Europe share common values of democracy and the rule of law, as well as deep historical, and cultural bonds.” And, noting increasing interactions between parliamentarians from the three countries, the statement spoke of how such meetings reinforce “the democratic legitimacy” of the alliance by “provid[ing] for the direct representation of our respective peoples in this cooperation.”³³

Further, Netanyahu is hardly the only Israeli leader to make this point; these sentiments have also been expressed outside the context of bilateral or trilateral meetings. Shmuel Revel, Israel’s ambassador to Cyprus since 2017, stated that Israel believed the two countries were linked by “history and the shared values of democracy.” In March 2021, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz spoke of the unique capacity for high-level cooperation on energy amongst “the three open societies and democracies of the Eastern Mediterranean.”³⁴ And, after meeting with President Nicos Anastasiades, President Reuven Rivlin said that the two countries were bound together by “shared values, including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law...in a region where these values are not always respected.”³⁵ And, in 2021, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid touted the relationship as “friendship built on a deep foundation of shared values.”³⁶ And, while

³¹ “Trilateral meeting between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (January 28, 2016). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/Trilateral-meeting-between-Israel-Greece-and-Cyprus-28-Jan-2016.aspx>

³² Trilateral meeting between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (January 28, 2016). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/Trilateral-meeting-between-Israel-Greece-and-Cyprus-28-Jan-2016.aspx>; “PM Netanyahu’s remarks at the synagogue in Thessaloniki.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (June 15, 2017). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/PM-Netanyahus-remarks-at-Thessaloniki-synagogue-15-June-2017.aspx>

³³ “Remarks by PM Netanyahu at the joint statements at the 5th Trilateral Summit.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (December 20, 2018). <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/Remarks-by-PM-Netanyahu-at-the-joint-statements-at-the-5th-Trilateral-Summit-20-Dec-2018.aspx>; “Israel-Cyprus-Greece Trilateral Declaration.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (December 21, 2018). <https://www.mfa.gr/missionsabroad/en/israel-en/news/israel-cyprus-greece-5th-trilateral-summit-declaration-beersheba-december-20th-2018.html>

³⁴ “EastMed pipeline could be ready in five years.” *Knews* (2021). <https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/news/eastmed-pipeline-could-be-ready-in-five-years>

³⁵ “The President of the Republic met with the President of Israel.” *Government of Cyprus: Press and Information Office* (February 14, 2021). <https://www.pio.gov.cy/en/press-releases-article.html?id=18442#flat>

³⁶ Yair Lapid statement at: “Trilateral Meeting: Israel, Greece, Cyprus” (August 22, 2021) <https://www.facebook.com/IsraelMFA/videos/261084585855028>

this theme is not commonly expressed in the heat of Knesset debates, Israeli commentators and policy experts frequently speak of the role that shared democratic values play in bolstering and entrenching the friendship between Israel and Cyprus; some add that Israel should value its relationship with democratic Cyprus because of the positive impact it could have on Jerusalem's political culture (and vice-versa).³⁷

Israel also sees Cyprus as a friendly neighbor that it can rely on for the sort of cooperation that is traditional among regional allies. Cyprus is increasingly a partner in educational exchange programs with Israeli universities and teaching hospitals. Many Israeli medical students, for example, study in Cyprus before returning to Israel for their residency. And, Cyprus, which used to turn to other European countries in cases where they needed top-flight medical care, today sends many of those seriously ill patients to Israeli hospitals.

Cyprus and Israel now cooperate on strategies for managing shipping routes in the Mediterranean, natural disasters, and environmental emergencies. As part of the trilateral framework, the two countries along with Greece work together in the arena of meteorology.³⁸ The most obvious manifestation of this for the Israeli public is that recently the three countries have begun to jointly name storms that they are tracking together.³⁹ They have worked together to fight forest fires,⁴⁰ and, in 2021, PM Naftali Bennett spoke about how they would begin to work together as neighbors in the region to address the climate crisis.⁴¹

Cyprus is a hot tourism spot for Israelis looking to travel abroad without a long flight. There is continuous talk in Israel of expanding tourist ties with Cyprus. Since the beginning of Covid-19, an active effort has been made to allow travel between the countries. And in December 2021, Merav Michaeli, Israel's Transportation Minister, told her Cypriot counterpart that Israel wanted to be added as a stop on a potential Cyprus-Greece ferry. The ministers emphasized the plan "would facilitate the free movement of people and enrich the available options for transportation between the three countries."⁴²

Many Israelis travel to Cyprus to wed outside the jurisdiction of religious authorities that control marriage in the country. As Israel recognizes the validity of the civil marriages performed abroad, Cyprus's proximity makes it an ideal destination for such ceremonies. And, over and over, in discussions of Israel-RoC ties, the topic of civil marriage has been raised. Unfortunately, some Israelis see Cyprus as a place where they can escape regulatory oversight, engage in rowdy or immoral behavior, or participate in criminal enterprises.

For many Israelis the partnerships between Cyprus and Israel expressed in this last section - those that don't concern "high politics" - are the ones they are likely most familiar with. This is a challenge if leaders

³⁷ Orna Mizrahi, "Israel's Policy in its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus." *Strategic Assessment* (July 2020) <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Israels-Policy-in-its-Triangular-Relations-with-Greece-and-Cyprus.pdf>

³⁸ "Signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Cyprus and Greece." *Israel Meteorological Service* (August 25, 2020) <https://ims.gov.il/en/node/131>.

³⁹ "Cyprus, Greece and Israel begin naming extreme weather systems." *In-Cyprus* (September 30, 2021). <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/cyprus-greece-and-israel-begin-naming-extreme-weather-systems/>

⁴⁰ Tova Lazaroff, "Israel sends two planes to help Cyprus battle huge forest fires." *Jerusalem Post* (July 4, 2021). <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israel-sends-two-planes-to-help-cyprus-battle-huge-forest-fires-672793>;
"Cyprus says ready to send firefighting planes to Israel." *The Times of Israel* (August 16, 2021) https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/cyprus-says-ready-to-send-firefighting-planes-to-israel/

⁴¹ Lahav Harkov, "Bennett hosts trilateral meeting with Greek, Cypriot counterparts." *Jerusalem Post* (December 7, 2021). <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/bennett-hosts-trilateral-meeting-with-greek-cypriot-counterparts-688081>

⁴² "Cyprus-Greece maritime passenger link could possibly extend to also include Israel." *In-Cyprus* (December 12, 2021). <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/cyprus-greece-maritime-passenger-link-could-possibly-also-include-israel/>

aim to promote an understanding of the deep strategic and economic ties between the countries; however, it is also a point of entry that can allow for better education about the nature of the partnership.

Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has shown a number of avenues where Cypriot and Israeli relations are deepening and broadening. Far from being a temporary partnership or one judged to be unimportant by Israeli elites, top Israeli officials have come to increasingly appreciate the vital nature of the strategic ties between the two countries and the wide range of benefits of the friendship. More, they have begun to consider Cyprus a major partner in the energy sector, an important bridge to Europe, and a potential military ally. Some Israel elites also appear to accept the qualitative importance of shared democratic values as the basis for a friendship. All this would seem to portend well for the resiliency of strong ties between the countries. However, the biggest challenge is that while the fundamentals are there, many in Israel - including a number in Israeli politics - simply know very little about the deepest nature of the Israel-RoC partnership. Fortuitously, this is a problem that may be solved if it is given proper attention.

Yonatan Brander is a Visiting Researcher at Mitvim and a PhD candidate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where he is a student in the Davis Graduate School of International Relations. His research interests include diplomatic history, international relations theory, Israeli politics, and security studies.