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Syriza's Victory and Greek-Israeli Relations

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The Coalition of Radical Left (Syriza) was the big winner of the Greek national elections of January 25, 2015, as expected. With 36.34% of the votes, Syriza and its leader (now Prime Minister) Alexis Tsipras won 149 seats, two seats shy of absolute majority. New Democracy, of now former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, came second with 27.86% and 76 seats. Syriza chose to form a coalition government with Panos Kammenos' populist and far-right (though often-referred to as center-right) Independent Greeks (ANEL), that won 13 seats with 4.8% of the votes. Not only that, but Tsipras appointed Kammenos as the new Minister of Defense. Although leftist Nikos Kotzias, Syriza's new Foreign Minister, is more cool-headed and pragmatist, if assertive, than Kammenos, the Ministry of Defense plays an important role in security issues and Kammenos might adopt a harder line that could challenge Greece's overall foreign policy with particular respect to relations with Turkey and Israel. Overall, these developments may signal a new approach in Greek foreign policy on issues ranging from the EU, to Russia and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Syriza's election to power has been for many a much-awaited development that bears hopes for Greece's economic and political future. With its ambitious and anti-austerity program, Syriza is expected to confront troika's (International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission) policies towards Greece, reboot the economy and take the country out of the crisis. In many ways, Syriza's choice of also anti-austerity ANEL has been a tactical move. In contrast to his other choice (the centrist and pro-European The River), Tsipras seems to understand that a coalition with ANEL would not endanger the government's cohesion in case the negotiations with Brussels or Berlin take a wrong turn. In that sense, the conditions for a shift in Greek foreign policy, at least in terms of the EU, are already there. This has also manifested in the coalition's early decision to oppose the EU's latest plans for the imposition of new sanctions on Russia.

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But potential changes may not only affect Greece's relations with the EU and Russia, but also the geostrategic shifts underway in the Eastern Mediterranean and specifically relations with Israel. Since 2011, security, political and energy-related changes in the Syriza's Victory and Greek-Israeli Relations Eastern Mediterranean have been altering the regional balance of power. Primarily driven by common concerns caused from Turkish policies in the region and by profits in the energy and economic sectors, Israel, Cyprus and Greece have gradually formed a multileveled partnership which at this stage could well be seen as an alliance. Their cooperation ranges from plans to co-exploit and export the new-found hydrocarbons of Cyprus and Israel, to generate and export electricity, to economic and security agreements. Most recently, agreements between Greece, Cyprus and Egypt, which also include energy cooperation, have contributed to the changing regional power setting. Greece's Syriza-ANEL coalition contains two factors that may have negative implications for the country's relations with Israel and, by extension, for the sustainability of the network of cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. First, the leader and other members of ANEL have occasionally made not only anti-Israeli but also anti-Semitic statements. If they keep up with this approach they might put Greek-Israeli relations at risk. Second, Syriza has been a known supporter of the Palestinian cause while it has openly criticized previous governments for signing military agreements with Israel - which it considers to be expansionist.

A Syriza decision to change the doings of its predecessors could entail deterioration in Greek-Israeli relations and a number of challenges with regard to the country's partnership with Cyprus and Egypt as well. Given that ANEL has similar attitudes toward Israel, albeit for different reasons, there could not be any effective opposition were Syriza to revise Greece's Israel policy, though part of the public opinion, business and religious elites would likely disagree. It should be pointed out that so far Syriza or ANEL have not made any statements or taken any decisions that would negatively affect Greece's relations with Israel or their cooperation in the energy domain.

What becomes clear for the time being is that Syriza will follow a multidimensional foreign policy which, as the new Foreign Minister Kotzias suggests in his writings and statements, will ensure a mediating role for Greece. Something that he himself experienced in the 1990s under the PASOK governments as a diplomat, when the Foreign Ministry took up such a role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Greece's traditionally good relations with Arab nations and its EU membership could empower it to facilitate and even host high-level official multilateral meetings, be it



within an EU framework or independently, or unofficial dialogue between lower officials, academics and civil society actors as a confidence building measure. The fact that actors such as Mahmoud Abbas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Hamas have congratulated the Greek people for the election results shows some potential for a more active Greek role in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

However, the participation of ANEL in the new government coalition complicates things. It is worth noting that although ANEL's anti-Semitism may not be ideologically coherent or officially declared like that of Golden Dawn (the Greek neo-Nazi party), it is as dangerous. The reasons for that are mostly related with its rhetoric, which targets traditionally far-right masses of lower societal and educational level. After all, it is not Syriza's Victory and Greek-Israeli Relations accidental that ANEL members have also flirted with popular conspiracy theories such as the chemtrails hoax that is based on the notion that airplanes spray chemicals in order to pacify and control populations.

Despite the gloom that these factors may point to, it should be noted that sources close to Syriza and Greek analysts emphasize that Syriza will hardly prioritize foreign policy over issues such as the economy and the country's debt. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether ANEL-like ideas and rhetoric will make it into Syriza's far-left circles. If not, then points of friction between the two parties might not be difficult to arise and thus cause tensions in this already paradoxical coalition.

Because of the media frenzy, Syriza may come across as radical or dangerous. The truth is that it is not that radical and thus not that dangerous. Its election has been heroized, its goals exaggerated and its rhetoric overplayed. For the moment it has only made pragmatic steps, albeit in its own particular style. Such is expected to be its stance toward Israel – without significant changes – especially if Syriza manages to compartmentalize its foreign policy from Kammenos' ideas and aspirations. Relations with Cyprus will also remain strong and perhaps even improve should Greece become more committed to supporting the Republic of Cyprus and the reunification of the island.

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