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To cite this article: Ioannis Th. Mazis & Markos I. Troulis (2020): Israeli–Greek Common Security Concerns: On the Deterrence of Turkey’s Adventurism, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2020.1857608](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1857608)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1857608>



Published online: 30 Dec 2020.



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# Israeli–Greek Common Security Concerns: On the Deterrence of Turkey’s Adventurism

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## Introduction

Determining a strategic response to an aggressive actor or revisionist state is a critical function of national governments, especially those of weaker states directly facing such threats. An array of tools can be marshalled to neutralize threats to the vital interests or even survival of weaker states, such as military expenditures, strategic alignments and partnerships, diplomatic initiatives, communication maneuvers, or reliance on internal political and decision-making organizations. In general, a state deters a stronger aggressor by making it clear that the cost of military action would be greater than any probable benefit.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, presupposes that the actors are rational; even if their actions appear irrational, it may be assumed that their decisions were based on a mistaken assessment of the relevant balance of power. States evaluate threats on the basis of distribution of power, geographic proximity, and declared intentions, and then decide whether a security dilemma exists, i.e.,

a situation in which...actions by a state intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons or making alliances, can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no side really desires it.<sup>2</sup>

Deterrence is produced through a decision-making process and a set of operational steps; its effectiveness “is magnified by geography and access to resources, which further complicate international relations.”<sup>3</sup> The geostrategic inclinations of the Great Powers may intensify or ease threats, but they always determine their significance. Geography is the crux of the matter, as in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, positioned as it is next to a large portion of the world’s oil and natural gas reserves. Geography is the science of “approaching natural space as

well as the dialectic syntheses of this space with human societies representing the 'human spaces.' These dialectic syntheses are defined geographical spaces."<sup>4</sup> Physical geography and the interaction of human societies with it form the scientific geopolitical framework in which a coherent description and analysis may take place.

Strategic theory, its interplay with geopolitical reality, and the geostrategic inclinations of the Great Powers provide the theoretical background for this investigation. The focus will be the influence of a geopolitical reading of international politics on the strategic reasoning of state actors. The core research questions are: What are Israel's strategic priorities and why is its deterrence strategy considered diachronically successful? Are there any similarities and/or differences between the threats Israel and Greece face? Finally, how is Greece's deterrence strategy evaluated vis-à-vis Turkey's revisionism and aggressive policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean, and beyond?

Israeli deterrence strategy, as an integral part of its strategic behavior *tout azimuth*, can briefly be outlined in terms of threats (including existential ones), challenges, operational initiatives, doctrine, and the regional balance of power. All of these can be examined in light of Turkey's ongoing adventurism. Israel's strategic behavior will be analyzed in comparison to Greece's security challenges and policies with regard to Turkey, which engages in aggressive tactics in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East at the expense of Greek and Israeli vital interests. Is there any prospect for strategic alignment resulting from a convergence of interests between Israel and Greece and a shared perception of security challenges? Moreover, what are the limitations of such an alignment, and what role might Cyprus play in the dynamic?

### **Israel's Strategic Behavior and Turkey's Adventurism**

Since the Eastern Mediterranean is extremely important to both Jerusalem and Athens in terms of naval strategic depth, proven and potential energy resources, and the projection of power capability in relation to Cyprus, the regional initiatives of one have a direct impact on the decision-making of the other. The strategic behavior of both Israel and Greece has been shaped to some extent by Turkey's ongoing adventurism over the last decades. Greece faces a clear threat from the revisionist claims made by Turkey in Western Thrace, the Aegean, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Cyprus. Israel, for its part, is worried about the Muslim Brotherhood's engagement with Turkey, and that Ankara's strategic antisemitism is driving it to engage in aggressive rhetoric against Israel.

The shift in Turkish-Israeli relations has been identified with the parallel Turkish transition toward revisionist aspirations that took place in the 1990s. The rationale

for Turkey's anti-Israel strategy is related to its position in the regional balance of power: Ankara's behavior demonstrates its intention to exploit its Islamic identity in order to manipulate other Muslim countries and position itself as a leader among them.

It is significant that even the Charter Treaty of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in its first article, declares that an objective of the member-states is "to support and empower the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination and establish their sovereign State with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, while safeguarding its historic and Islamic character as well as the Holy places therein."<sup>5</sup> This means that any Turkish effort to achieve a broader role in the regional system or to burnish its image in the Muslim world—unburdened by accusations regarding its centuries-long Ottoman past and its decades-long pro-Western stance—could lead Ankara to promote an antisemitic narrative.

Therefore, Israel's strategic process is influenced by Turkey's own strategic planning, how it aims to implement it, and whether any other regional actors have the desire and ability to balance Ankara. Traditionally, Israel has followed a deterrence strategy, rejecting maximalist choices and seeking to preserve the status quo.<sup>6</sup> Since hostile Arab countries have clear superiority in terms of strategic depth, population, and geographic positioning (e.g., circulation and two-front war threat), Jerusalem has opted for a deterrence strategy, seeing it as the only choice for Israel's survival. On this issue, Samy Cohen notes:

In a country surrounded by hostile neighbors that depends entirely on the military to ensure its survival, the army's deterrence capability is a basic pillar of its strategy. Calling it into question would be tantamount to an "existential threat" for Israel. When deterrence ceases to function or when it is defied, there is no greater national emergency than to reestablish it, usually via a display of force or a military feat.<sup>7</sup>

Israel's deterrence strategy has been in line with broad US strategy, even in the post-Cold War era. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR a unipolar international system emerged, and US interests became aligned with the preservation of the status quo, consistent with its desire to deter regional hegemonic aspirations anywhere in the world. This was especially the case in the Middle East, since it is considered a crucial region in terms of energy reserves and geostrategic location. The Greater Middle East is also found at the center of Nicholas Spykman's theory of the rimland, i.e., the critically important territories surrounding the Eurasian heartland.<sup>8</sup> Due to the exceptional geopolitical value of the region and its positioning in the backyard of several rivals of the US, the Greater Middle East is an enduring theater of great power competition and a traditional arena for Washington's projection of power. Since the US has not favored regional hegemonies or compellence strategies in the post-Cold war era, its

historical alliance with Israel has been reinforced and defined in terms of their common interests, largely taking the form of status quo preservation.

However, Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has recently emerged as a new challenger for regional primacy following historical examples such as Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Among such cases, one common factor centers on hostility toward Israel, since anti-Israel rhetoric consistently elicits a reflexive reaction from majority-Muslim populations. But is this Turkish tendency new? President Halil Turgut Özal's stance during the Gulf War and Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's foreign policy in the 1990s have been regarded as key indicators of a country aiming to lead regionally. In particular, Malik Mufti points out that when describing Turkish foreign policy aims Özal declared, "There are two lines in Turkish foreign policy .... One is Atatürk's and the other is İsmet [İnönü] Pasha's." Mufti continues to contextualize Özal's declaration: "Atatürk took Hatay and advocated an active stance against Italy and Germany. İnönü's attitude by contrast was 'extraordinarily conservative .... It sought only to prolong the status quo. And it was too hesitant to take what could be taken.'"<sup>9</sup>

It is significant that in line with this perception, Özal engaged in certain foreign policies aimed at seizing Iraq's Kirkuk-Mosul region, an opportunity he saw in the aftermath of the 1980s Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War. However, he generally described his aspirations as being in line with US and Israeli regional interests. In other words, good relations with the US and Israel were an unquestioned priority in Turkey's strategic vision. It is worth noting that despite his pro-Islamist rhetoric before the 1996 elections, Erbakan did practically the same thing. Of course, the question arises, what has Turkey—already a revisionist power—changed by rupturing relations with Jerusalem? And why should Israel be considered an obstacle to Turkey's ambitions and the maximization of its regional influence?

As to the latter question, it is understood that Israel is a status quo power in the neighborhood and a close ally of the US. Given Washington's desire to preserve the regional balance without its allies' full strategic independence, if Turkey wants to dominate, it cannot be Israel's ally. This leads Ankara, the aspiring hegemon, to position itself against Israel, the most powerful regional actor, i.e., the pivotal state in the local balance of powers. Moreover, the Turks could not implement a successful deterrence strategy in the Caucasus and Central Asia against powers such as Russia and Iran without first addressing the balance of power on other fronts or in other potential theaters of war. In light of this, Turkey has preferred to use a "buck-passing" strategy. Its disadvantageous placement in the distribution of power after the fall of the Soviet Union led it to cooperate with the US, forming a stable balancing alliance. Consequently, in the 1990s, Ankara cultivated cooperation with Jerusalem—a traditional strategic partner of

Washington—despite the beginning of its drift toward a revisionist foreign policy. This tripartite cooperation has been cited many times as the “triangular relationship.”<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the question of what has changed for Turkey since the rupture in relations, Prof. Efraim Inbar has offered some important insights.<sup>11</sup> First, Greece’s appeasement strategy toward Turkey after the 1990s decreased the security threats perceived by Ankara, allowing it to become a more flexible player in the Middle East, especially after the AKP (Justice and Development Party) rose to power. Second, Turkey’s strategic planning has included projections of economic gains from energy trade with Iran and other energy-rich countries in the region. Third, the rise of the AKP, and political Islam in general, has been identified with the intense Islamization of Turkey’s policy orientation. Fourth, Turkey is steadily de-Westernizing as a result of its prospective rejection by the EU; the poor chances of Turkey joining the EU have driven it to search for alternatives in the East and the Muslim World. Fifth, Turkey’s emerging elites—insofar as their views are expressed by the AKP—can be defined as ideologically antisemitic. This includes the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since the Cold War, Turkey’s intentions have always been malign; however, the regional balance of power and resultant security dilemmas determined its stance, and the extent of its capabilities determined its behavior. This is demonstrated by the fluctuation of the most significant indicators of Turkey’s hard power. In 1990, Turkey’s GDP was estimated at \$108.56 billion, its population at 58,103,600, and its defense budget at \$3.59 billion.<sup>12</sup> In 2000, Ankara’s GDP rose to \$210 billion, its population to 67,652,000, and its defense budget to \$7.3 billion in the middle of a serious economic crisis that led to an International Monetary Fund surveillance program.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, when its neighborhood sank into deep instability due to the so-called “Arab Spring” and the European economic crisis, Turkey had a GDP of \$737 billion, a population of 75,705,147, and chose to raise its defense budget to \$10.5 billion.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, Turkish GDP was estimated at \$744 billion after a few years of recession. The country’s population was 81,648,103 and its defense budget \$8.1 billion.<sup>15</sup> (The seeming decrease in Turkey’s defense budget is explained by Ankara limiting its military’s dependence on foreign defense industries. The development of Turkey’s domestic defense industry allowed it to proceed with extended equipment programs without additional costs.)

Turkey’s increased military capabilities have given the AKP elite the necessary encouragement to express maximalist aspirations and seek a change within the regional power dynamic. This, in turn, has led to a worsening in its relations with Israel, especially after Erdoğan’s theatrical protest in Davos in 2009 and, of course, the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. As Kenneth Waltz notes, “Structures are...defined by the distribution of capabilities across units. Changes in this distribution are changes of system.”<sup>16</sup> Shifts in strategic behavior are reflected in

this kind of systemic change. It is important to try to discern intentions, but at the end of the day, it is the composition of the system that shapes perceptions and, ultimately, an actor's behavior. In our case, Turkey is considered a peer regional power as long as it believes that it possesses the necessary capabilities to rise to the status of such a power and destabilize the periphery. It opposes Israel ipso facto so long as Jerusalem continues to implement a strategy of status quo preservation. Moreover, Turkey's adventurism is clearly in opposition to the grand strategy aims of the US. Washington's declining operational presence in the Greater Middle East for the sake of balancing China clearly was not intended to allow for the rise of a strategically independent power in such a crucial geographical area. US priorities involve the exploitation of Turkey's pivotal geostrategic placement, but always in coordination with the Atlantic security umbrella.<sup>17</sup>

### **Greece's Geostrategic Positioning**

The type of behavior exhibited by Turkey that threatens Greece's sovereign rights can also be seen in its declared intentions to revise international treaties such as the one signed in Lausanne in 1923; alter the status quo in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean; and maintain its forty-six-year military occupation of more than a third (38 percent) of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey directly threatens Greek sovereignty through daily breaches of its airspace and violations of Greek and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) potential or extant rights on the basis of Article 121 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Moreover, this perception of threat is intensified by the vast increase in Turkish military capabilities and its willingness to engage in combat in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, or to deploy naval, air, or ground units in Albania or even African countries in consistent cooperation with Islamist movements operating under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>18</sup> Taken together, the entire picture reveals a Turkish tendency toward interventionism and aggression. Furthermore, it is impossible to analyze this in isolation—any Turkish move in the Greater Middle East directly affects its geostrategic positioning vis-à-vis Greece. Over the past few years, Turkey's increasing military capabilities have driven Greece to change its priorities, given the probability of an escalation in tensions, by adopting a strategy of deterrence instead of counting on a decisive win on the battlefield. In other words, Athens tries to make clear that the cost of aggressive action against it would be disproportionately larger than the probable gain.

However, this remains simply declarative, since in practice, Greece has taken the approach of appeasement, as several examples illustrate.<sup>19</sup> First, Athens has not extended its territorial waters to twelve nautical miles off the coast despite its right to do so, as stipulated in Article 3 of UNCLOS. This is due to its fear of the fact that Turkey has declared it would consider such an action *casus belli*.

Second, Greece has avoided actively condemning the daily violation of its airspace: Turkish jets even fly over inhabited Greek islands (illegal overflights have taken place in the North Aegean, the Dodecanese, and recently even over Thrace in continental Greece). Third, Greek military strategy neglects the concept of the united defense space with Cyprus that was adopted in the early 1990s. Military equipment decisions (e.g., to remove S-300 missiles that had been deployed in Cyprus) and other specific defense plans have diminished Greece's credibility in strategic discussions regarding Cyprus's protection. Fourth, Turkey has often engaged in seabed mining research on Greek and Cypriot continental shelves, in disregard of Article 121, Paragraph 2 of UNCLOS. These violations have taken place after Greece allowed Turkey's EU accession negotiations to begin (at the Helsinki Summit 1999) with preconditions for peace and cooperation finally introduced by Ankara.

Turkey's adventurism has been characterized as "Neo-Ottomanism," which may be described as a set of strategic policies aimed at securing internal cohesion via a multifaceted identity: *Türk-İslam Sentezi* [Turkish-Islamic Synthesis].<sup>20</sup> Neo-Ottomanism also narratively legitimizes territorial claims in the wider neighborhood, both in regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire and in territories further afield.<sup>21</sup> This outlook gained traction in the wake of the Cold War, with the decline of the Soviet threat in the Black Sea and the Caucasus and the resulting major redistribution of power in the region. Erdoğan's words on how Turkey envisions its role at the core of Eurasia are telling:

The residents of this particular region do not have the luxury of just sitting back and being spectators of the world stage.... Either we will be the subject of world politics, or the object .... A Turkish Commonwealth would enable us to play a more active and efficient role in international forums, protect the interests of our people, and contribute to peace and stability in our region.<sup>22</sup>

Escalating tensions in the aftermath of the "Davos Incident" in 2009 (where Erdoğan made speculative accusations against Israel) dovetailed with Turkey's open development of relations with Hamas. Ankara did all it could to provoke Jerusalem. It is indicative that quite recently, Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen reportedly said that "Iranian power is fragile, but the real threat is from Turkey."<sup>23</sup> For any moderate actor in the Greater Middle East that considers itself a stabilizing factor, Turkey's military power and its aggressive intentions are an increasing source of concern. Its strategic behavior has prompted the formation of interstate counterbalancing alliances in the region and thus it is the crux of a destabilizing domino effect.



Turkey's broadened role and the clear-cut threat it presents should be balanced with a coherent, credible, and fully legitimate deterrence strategy. This is especially true with regard to Greece; in recent years, Ankara has implemented a circle strategy endeavoring to establish military bases in Albania (Avlon) and Libya (Al-Watiya). The consequent security dilemma Greece faces is similar to the conditions Israel faces on a permanent basis: a relatively small population; aggressive enemies (e.g., Iran); and the necessity for a deterrence strategy as well as multi-front military preparation. To meet such challenges, Israel established the National Security Council, which operates in full coordination with the executive, the armed forces, and academia. In 2019, Jerusalem invested 5.8 percent of its GDP in defense, despite the fact that its growth was estimated at 3.1 percent.<sup>24</sup> In addition, it is a world leader in terms of military R&D programs and has acquired crucial equipment, such as the F-35I stealth jets, with capabilities unequaled by any other military technology imports to the greater region.

In Greece, on the other hand, the culture of strategic appeasement cultivated after 1996 has led the public discourse to fixate on the notion of "unnecessary defense budgets," while the executive has consistently refused to take expert opinions into account during the policy-making process, and has likewise refused to relinquish control of public messaging around this issue. Specifically, Greece has not yet established a similar national security council, even if its role would be advisory and its decisions non-binding. Moreover, Greece insists on not balancing the Turkish military threat directly, as this would not guarantee that the balance of power would be safeguarded. Instead, it uses diplomatic means exclusively via third parties, whether states or institutions, that have no operative authority. Due to this fact, Turkey's revisionist policies have intensified, and the escalation has spilled over into territorial and other kinds of interventionist claims that would have been unthinkable one or two decades ago. Ankara's projections of power in Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, and Libya are remarkable indications of its will to take on a new role in its greater periphery.

When a small state constructs a balancing strategy in order to deter a more powerful revisionist one, it must make use of external resources. These include alliances; strategic alignment with actors also affected by the revisionist state's adventurism; and, finally, diplomatic efforts to remove any preconditions for such alignment.<sup>25</sup> In recent years, Greek analysts have been proven correct in their assessments of which states would be suitable for such an alignment (e.g., France, Egypt, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates), but Athens has failed to effectively leverage that convergence of interests. Furthermore, in the absence of a strategic culture, Greece has failed to organize its army accordingly, continuing to require a nine-month military service for males only, while in Israel men are conscripted for a service of just under three years and women serve for two. This has added to the IDF's prestige in Israel. Military service there also opens employment opportunities, whether based on skills acquired or contacts made.

Conversely, in Greece, the prevalence of advancement thanks to personal connections and favoritism subverts any chance for the army to become a well-respected institution.

As for the ongoing Israeli–Greek partnership, strategic convergence is progressing relatively slowly. Sales of military technology, such as UAVs, have been marginal, and Athens still hesitates to openly align itself with Jerusalem, despite the fact that enemies of Israel, such as Hamas, are inclined to cooperate with Erdoğan. As mentioned above, Turkey’s destabilizing behavior extends to the entire Middle East and even to Central Africa and Central Asia, giving it the strategic image of an Islamist power. Ankara has aligned itself with the Muslim Brotherhood and specific groups that are antagonistic toward secular powers in the relevant geographical complex. This drives Greek foreign policy along a specific path on which it is making only hesitant progress.

## Conclusion

Both in terms of strategy-making processes and what is currently at stake, Jerusalem and Athens have a clear incentive to come together against destabilizing actors in the region. Greece, however, seems not to have adopted the clear-cut, rational approach, and instead is appeasing the Turkish threat despite the damage this does to its own credibility. As a result, a valid deterrence strategy cannot be implemented, and Turkey’s revisionist practices cannot be balanced effectively. This situation is urgent, as Ankara’s revisionism is evident in its behavior. A counterbalancing strategic alignment among the key actors in the relevant geopolitical complex is critical.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, XXX:2 (1978), 178.
- <sup>3</sup> Jason J. Blazevic, “Defensive Realism in the Indian Ocean: Oil, Sea Lanes and the Security Dilemma,” *China Security*, V:3 (2009), 60.
- <sup>4</sup> Ioannis Th. Mazis, *Geopolitics: Theory and Praxis* [Greek] (Athens, 2002), p. 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Organization of the Islamic Conference, *Charter Treaty* (Rabat, 1969), Chapter 1, Article 1, Paragraph 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Efraim Inbar and Shmuel Sandler, “Israel’s Deterrence Strategy Revisited,” *Security Studies*, III:2 (1993), 331–32.
- <sup>7</sup> Samy Cohen, *Israel’s Asymmetric Wars* (New York, 2010), pp. 78–79.
- <sup>8</sup> See Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of Peace* (Harcourt, 1944).

- <sup>9</sup> Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (New York, 2009), p. 63.
- <sup>10</sup> See Dan Arbell, "The US–Turkey–Israel triangle," *The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, No. 34 (2014), 1–47.
- <sup>11</sup> Efraim Inbar, "Israeli–Turkish Tensions and Beyond," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, VIII:3 (2010), 44–45.
- <sup>12</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "NATO," *The Military Balance*, XCII:1 (1992), 59.
- <sup>13</sup> IISS, "NATO and non-NATO Europe," *The Military Balance*, CI:1 (2001), 73.
- <sup>14</sup> IISS, "Europe," *The Military Balance*, CXI:1 (2011), 151.
- <sup>15</sup> IISS, "Europe," *The Military Balance*, CXX:1 (2020), 153.
- <sup>16</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, 1979), p. 96.
- <sup>17</sup> See Markos Troulis, *US–Turkish Relations: Theory of Alliances and Geopolitical Co–Evaluation* [Greek] (Athens, 2019).
- <sup>18</sup> Burak Bekdil, "Has Turkish President Erdoğan Distanced Himself from the Muslim Brotherhood?" *Middle East Forum*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.meforum.org/57766/has-turkish-president-erdogan-distanced-himself>. Regarding the analysis of the levels of threat, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (New York, 1987), pp. 21–26.
- <sup>19</sup> Ioannis Th. Mazis and Markos Troulis, "Greece's Aegean policy in the post-Cold War period," *Ege jeopolitiği*, Hasret Çomak, Burak Şakir Şeker and Dimitri Ioannidis (eds.) (Ankara, 2020), pp. 851–57.
- <sup>20</sup> Ali Çağlar and Mustafa Uluçakar, "Günümüz türkçülüğünün İslamla imtihanı: Türk–İslam Sentezi ve Aydınlar Ocağı," *Journal of International Relations*, No. 26 (2017), 120–40.
- <sup>21</sup> Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, XLII:6 (2006), 947.
- <sup>22</sup> Mevlut Katik, "Turkic Summit to Explore Commonwealth Possibility," *Eurasianet*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111506.shtml>.
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- <sup>25</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Strategies for Survival," *Perspectives on World Politics*, Richard Little and Michael Smith (eds.) (London, 2006), pp. 62–71.