

## EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IN UNCHARTED WATERS: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities



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Editor

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*This publication reflects the views of the authors only which had the freedom to choose any terminology they wanted to express their free opinion.*

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## Preface

WALTER GLOS

*Director, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Turkey*

Dear Readers,

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Turkey has been organizing activities in the context of regional security policy issues for years. The annual Istanbul Security Conference (ISC) and the Eastern Mediterranean security workshop that always follows are two main programs, both of which are organized in cooperation with Başkent University of Ankara.

The terrible developments around the corona virus pandemic have not allowed KAS Turkey to hold international in-person events this year.

Therefore, the idea of this publication was born, which we publish together with Prof. Michaël Tanchum. The purpose of this publication is to present in one volume a comprehensive explanatory account of the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, integrating the perspectives of local actors, major regional actors, and involved global powers. With a focus on the three interlinked conflicts of the Cyprus problem, the Greece-Turkey maritime boundary dispute, and the Libyan civil war, each contributor has provided an account of the Eastern Mediterranean crisis from the unique perspective of a particular actor – sometimes providing differing details and contrary narratives about the same events and phenomena discussed by other authors. The chapters were arranged deliberately in a specific sequence to help the reader retain and juxtapose the differing points of view. Thus, by reading the chapters of the volume in its entirety and in the order presented, the reader will be able to form an integrated framework for understanding of the complex, cross-cutting dynamics that characterize the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.

With this mandate, no restrictions were placed on the authors in terms of the manner of presentation of their respective topics – including the choice of terms for actors in the region. All the content in each chapter and the terminology used solely reflect the opinions of that particular author. They do not reflect the opinions of the other authors, the editor, the publishers, Başkent University Ankara or the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Turkey.

I wish you all an interesting reading of the publication.

## Introduction

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The "Eastern Mediterranean Crisis" has recently galvanized international interest, causing the geographic space known as the Eastern Mediterranean to now be recognized as pivotal strategic region in world affairs. The three interlinked flashpoints of the Cyprus problem, the Greece-Turkey maritime boundary dispute, and the Libyan civil war have transformed the Eastern Mediterranean into the locus of newly escalating tensions that involve an unprecedented number of international actors. Despite the recent attention, an adequate understanding of the region's complex geopolitical dynamics has been lacking. This volume is presented to address this analytical need.

Previous research, motivated primarily by the effort to analyse the geopolitical and commercial consequences of the region's recently discovered offshore natural gas reserves, have contributed to our understanding of existing dynamics among key Eastern Mediterranean states. However, these works provide only a partial perspective on account of the narrow parameters of the analyses. A systemic understanding of the Eastern Mediterranean requires a much broader outlook – one that considers the wider dynamics, rivalries, and synergies in the region. From this perspective, dynamics pertaining to all salient policies and interests of the regional states, as well as the role of greater powers and international actors merit a thorough evaluation to produce a comprehensive understanding of the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct geopolitical space in the context of regional and global transitions.

It is in this spirit that the present volume was envisaged to offer rich perspectives on a wide range of issues — including the increasing important role of Cyprus, the maritime boundary dispute between Greece and Turkey, the positioning of Egypt, and that of Jordan, the conflict in Libya — but also the positions of key international actors, including that of the EU, NATO, Russia and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in order to provide a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis regarding the future prospects of the region. While the contributions in the volume shed much-needed light onto each of these issues in turn, a common theme that binds them together is the way in which the Eastern Mediterranean's geopolitical identity is construed with reference to the main challenges that key actors face, and attempts to re-imagine the patterns of conflict and cooperation by examining the potential for regionalism and cooperation. In doing so, the contributors make recommendations about the way forward in addressing important obstacles to further regional cooperation and regarding the strategy that could be followed towards designing a viable and sustainable Eastern Mediterranean.

In that respect, several conclusions, among others, can be drawn from the discussions presented in the volume. First, there is a strategic urgency to solve the Eastern Mediterranean conflicts that are likely to influence significantly the relationships among the states in the region since they carry the potential to exacerbate existing tensions and create new ones. The tendency however, to bundle the issues of the Cyprus problem together with the Turkey-Greece maritime boundary dispute, but also the Libya conflict, is yet to yield results toward de-escalation and stabilization. A way forward then, could well be to compartmentalize the conflict zones and work on solutions in each domain concurrently. Engaging in concurrent processes,

even if each process progresses at a different pace, will ensure that grievances in one setting do not torpedo progress in other domains. Further, the momentum produced by positive results in one domain can be leveraged to create a more conducive environment for progress in the remaining areas.

The case of Cyprus is relevant here. Confidence in the Cyprus negotiating process needs to be restored and by outlining some parameters for joint development of Cyprus' natural gas resources and revenue-sharing, Turkish Cypriots can be assured that the Greek Cypriot side is amenable to more parity in the final outcome. Positive developments in Cyprus are also likely to yield results for the Turkey-Greece Maritime Boundary dispute. While negotiations between Athens and Ankara can include some formal adjudication rooted in international maritime law, it is unlikely that either side will receive their maximal boundary demands within an exclusively legal framework. Reaching a deal in Cyprus, however, may allow Greek and Turkish policymakers to show sufficient flexibility through *realpolitik* to facilitate the process.

The current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean also requires a much closer cooperation between NATO and the EU to create a synergy between their respective instruments of power. This is an indispensable strategic imperative not only for Europe, but also for Turkey. NATO has played a key part in diffusing recent tensions between the two allies, Greece, and Turkey, but coordination could provide more leverage for the EU's softer, diplomatic capabilities that are outside of NATO's mandate. Non-European nations should also be invited to take part in this process, and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) above all, could be brought into coordination with joint NATO-EU cooperation to play a constructive role by providing meaningful participation of the Arab states of the southern and eastern rims of the Mediterranean basin.

Regarding Libya too, the Political Dialogue Forum requires outside support, and mainly from the external stakeholders to establish a unity government that will bring together the Libyan rivals, backed by those opposing foreign actors, to work constructively under the same roof. Turkey, Egypt, Italy and France, among others, can be incentivized to support the Libyan elections, the selection of competent ministry officials, and the overall efficient functioning of a unity government in return for some assurance about the accommodation of their relevant interests through post-war reconstruction efforts and participating in other aspects of the economy of a reconstructed Libya.

And finally, there should be a recognition that Russia has several cross-cutting interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and seeks to maintain its relations with all the countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Russia's main concern is the reconstruction of Syria, it is keen to increase its energy and economic involvement with Eastern Mediterranean countries. These factors offer opportunities to incentivize for constructive cooperation through joint commercial ventures.

So, big challenges and choices lie ahead and it is in this timely volume that the reader is offered a range of perspectives regarding different actors in the region including global, regional, and local actors that make up the challenging geopolitical terrain of the Eastern Mediterranean. We hope that it will prove to be a valuable source of objective information and sound analysis for experts, policymakers and the public interested in the issues of the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean as a whole.

# The Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: A Regional System Perspective on the Mediterranean's new Great Game

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## The Eastern Mediterranean in a Changing Regional System

The Eastern Mediterranean has become the eye of a gathering geopolitical storm. After a Turkish and a Greek warship collided on August 12, 2020 during the most combustible naval stand-off in the Eastern Mediterranean in over twenty years, this current escalation cycle quickly demonstrated that regional tensions now carry an unprecedented potential for spiralling into a Mediterranean-wide, multi-national conflict. The crisis has already strained the fabric of the Mediterranean's existing rules-based order by dividing both NATO and the European Union (EU), challenging the ability of each of these institutions to contain and manage the crisis.

Making a show of its staunch support for Greece against Turkey, France dispatched warships to the contested waters, eventually sending its flagship *Charles de Gaulle* nuclear aircraft carrier. Middle Eastern powers Egypt and Israel, which each hold regular joint military exercises with Greece, expressed their solidarity. Egypt then conducted joint naval exercises with France and Greece while the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Ankara's inveterate Arab antagonist, sent its F-16 fighter craft to conduct joint air force exercises with Greece and France in the air space over the Eastern Mediterranean. With France, Egypt, and the UAE already in open conflict with Turkey in Libya, concerns were raised in international capitals that any further escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean could set off a geopolitical maelstrom across parts of Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

What is less recognized is that the Mediterranean basin is a regional system and the interlinkage of Eastern Mediterranean flashpoints is increasingly becoming a contest over the reordering of power relations across that system. The Mediterranean basin system, moreover, forms the hub of an emerging architecture of inter-regional connectivity so that the Eastern Mediterranean conflicts and the reordering of Mediterranean power relations are now intertwined with a new 'Great Game' – an intense and complex competition over the nexus of trans-Mediterranean trade routes, energy transit routes, and industrial manufacturing value chains that connect Europe and the MENA region.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey, Egypt, France, and Italy – the Mediterranean basin's four largest countries – are the principal actors in the new Great Game. Despite outside actors from Russia to the UAE intervening in the region and China's omnipresent economic activities, it is the jockeying among these four that defines the major geopolitical fault lines of the Mediterranean regional system. The main geopolitical fault line among these four has featured a deepening partnership between France and Egypt to oppose Turkey while Italy, compartmentalizing its eastern Mediterranean energy interests, has had a more distant alignment with Turkey based on a confluence of interests in Libya as well as the central Maghreb states of Algeria and Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> Turkey's 2020 intervention in the Libyan civil war, however, has altered Italy's strategic calculus.

The supralocal agendas, on the part of the Mediterranean actors themselves as well as outside international actors, are increasingly superseding the specifically local grievances that originally gave rise to the Turkey-Greece maritime boundary dispute, the Cyprus problem, and the Libya conflict. The role played by Eastern Mediterranean offshore energy in the interlinking of these three conflicts illustrates the transformative impact of these supralocal agendas in reshaping the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean's three interlinked conflicts now have become a central arena in the Great Game to reorder Mediterranean power relations and the patterns of trans-Mediterranean connectivity.

### **Eastern Mediterranean Energy and the Interlinkage of Regional Flashpoints**

Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundary disputes traditionally were a local affair, confined to sovereignty claims and counter-claims among Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey.<sup>3</sup> During the past five years, the region's offshore natural gas resources have catapulted the Eastern Mediterranean into becoming a key strategic pivot around which larger geopolitical fault-lines involving the EU and the MENA region converge. Italy and France have played integral roles in driving that change, which has placed the EU and Turkey's already complicated relationship on more adversarial terms.

The game-changer was the August 2015 discovery of Egypt's massive Zohr natural gas field by the Italian energy major Eni. Although today Eni is considered a private company, the Italian government maintains *de facto* control over Eni with its 30.33% share.<sup>4</sup>

Italy's largest company by revenue, Eni's drive to expand its market share across the Middle East and North Africa has shaped the parameters of Italy's foreign policy orientation.<sup>5</sup>

Eni's Zohr discovery, the largest Eastern Mediterranean gas find to date, meant the region now collectively had marketable volumes of natural gas. Eni, which is also the lead operator in Cyprus's natural gas development, began promoting a plan to pool Egyptian, Cypriot, and Israeli gas and use Egypt's liquefaction plants to cost-effectively market the region's gas to Europe as liquified natural gas (LNG).<sup>6</sup> The Italian company also happens to be a lead stake holder in one of Egypt's two LNG plants.

Commercially sensible as well as being a boon to Eni's ambitions for regional expansion, the Egypt-based LNG marketing scheme contained a geopolitical time bomb – it left no role for Turkey and its pipeline infrastructure to Europe, dashing Ankara's previously developed plans to become a regional energy hub. Consequently, Ankara attempted to send a message to the EU, Italy, Cyprus, and Egypt through a limited naval action. On February 23, 2018, the Turkish navy blockaded an Eni drill ship before it could reach its intended drill site in Cypriot waters, forcing the company to withdraw the vessel.<sup>7</sup> To mitigate its risks, Eni partnered with French energy giant Total in all of Eni's seven Cypriot licensing blocks, catapulting France into the middle of the Eastern Mediterranean energy morass.

During this timeframe, Cyprus agreed to supply Egypt's LNG plants for export. After Cyprus inked that deal, Israel, which had previously been considering an Israel-Turkey undersea gas pipeline, followed suit and contracted to sell its gas to Egypt. Turkey expressed its displeasure at these developments by engaging in a series of measured exercises of gunboat diplomacy, sending exploration and drill ships into Cypriot waters, each with naval escort.

In addition to not recognizing Cyprus's maritime boundaries, which Ankara maintains were drawn illegally at Turkey's expense, Ankara claims to be defending the rights of Turkish Cypriots in the northern half of the ethnically divided island who have been precluded from the development of Cyprus's offshore natural gas despite being the legal co-owners of Cyprus's natural resources.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to Ankara's desired outcome, Turkey's action pushed Rome closer to Nicosia and Cairo. With Italian encouragement, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was formed as a response to Turkey's escalation. Headquartered in Cairo, Italy was among the EMGF's founding members along with Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan. An international organization for promoting the development and marketing Eastern Mediterranean gas, Turkey has been excluded from the EMGF while France has applied for membership and the United States has applied for observer status in the forum.

Turkey's sabre-rattling against Cyprus accelerated a common front of interlinked security relationships to coalesce among the region's three current natural gas producers and Greece. With each subsequent Turkish act of gunboat diplomacy, this common front increasingly gained military support from France, Italy, and the United States, each of whom has significant economic investments in Eastern Mediterranean gas. For Turkey, its NATO allies' support of this common front is tantamount to a policy of containment that it cannot tolerate.

Facing strategic isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey opted for a breakout strategy by forming an overt, formal alliance with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. On 27 November 2019, Turkey and the GNA government signed two Memoranda of Understanding – an agreement on the "Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean," and an agreement on "Security and Military Cooperation." The maritime boundary agreement with the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, in Ankara's view,<sup>9</sup> provides Turkey a legal counter-claim to contest the Exclusive Economic Zones established by Greece's bilateral understandings with Egypt and Cyprus, upon which much of the development of the Eastern Mediterranean's offshore natural gas depends.

The Ankara-Tripoli maritime boundary agreement was accompanied by a military cooperation pact providing the GNA a security guarantee against the efforts of General Khalifa Haftar's forces, backed by France, Egypt, the UAE, and Russia to topple the Tripoli-based government. The GNA formally activated its military pact with Ankara in December 2019, linking the already tense maritime stand-off in the Eastern Mediterranean to a new escalation spiral in the Libyan civil war.

In contrast to France and Egypt's covert support for Haftar's campaign against Tripoli, Turkey opted for an overt security relationship and Turkish military intervention enabled the GNA to completely halt Haftar's 14-month campaign to capture Tripoli and, within six months, Turkish-supported GNA forces managed to push Haftar's forces 450 km back eastward to the city of Sirte. The gateway for the GNA to capture Libya's oil crescent region, the eastern Libyan forces made their stand in Sirte, the crossing of which Egypt declared, on 20 June 2020, as its red-line that would trigger an Egyptian invasion.<sup>10</sup>

Intense efforts on the part of Germany, the United States, and the United Nations have produced a ceasefire, with political leaders from each of the warring halves of Libya effectively

giving their tacit consent on 21 August 2020 for a demilitarized buffer zone around Sirte. The fragile ceasefire has held giving rise to the Libya Political Dialogue Forum negotiations for new Libyan elections and the subsequent formation of a unity government.<sup>11</sup>

Having succeeded in preserving the GNA, Turkey's large military presence in Libya now provides Ankara platform from which to challenge Greece, Cyprus and Egypt over the Eastern Mediterranean's maritime boundaries. Taking advantage of its newly enhanced regional position and responding to the signing of a Greece-Egypt maritime boundary demarcation agreement, Turkey attempted to press its claims against Greece by sending the Oruç Reis energy exploration ship, accompanied by a group of *five naval vessels*, to the contested waters near the Greek island of Kastellorizo, setting off the current escalation cycle. In contrast to previous cycles, the involvement of multiple foreign actors heralded the Eastern Mediterranean's transformation from being an isolated backwater to playing intricate role in the high-stakes geopolitics of the Mediterranean's Great Game.

### **The Eastern Mediterranean and the Geopolitics of the Mediterranean's Great Game**

The four largest countries in the Mediterranean basin – Egypt, Turkey, France, and Italy – collectively comprise over half the region's population. The scramble among these four to dominate Mediterranean's nexus of trade routes and energy transit routes that connect Europe, Africa, and Middle East is redefining the strategic architecture of the entire Mediterranean region. With the four most powerful militaries in the Mediterranean basin, the new Great Game for Mediterranean energy and commercial connectivity features a hard power dimension manifested with each of these four powers' involvement in the Libyan civil war and now has expanded to Eastern Mediterranean's waters between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus.

### **The Franco-Egyptian-Emirati Entente: Merging trans-Mediterranean agendas**

The key geopolitical formation in the Mediterranean's Great Game is the partnership between France and Egypt to oppose the expansion of Turkish influence on the shores of the southern Mediterranean and adjacent regions in sub-Saharan Africa. Defining the main regional cleavage, the Franco-Egyptian partnership also serves as a platform for the UAE in its systemic competition with Turkey and Qatar. Beyond the shared threat, perception between Paris, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi, France maintains a naval base in the UAE while Abu Dhabi engages close security cooperation with both France and Egypt in Africa. The three countries collectively maintain seven naval bases along the entire Red Sea approach to the Eastern Mediterranean on the Red Sea's African coast.<sup>12</sup> The UAE is the foremost backer of Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya and has been working steadily over the past five years to develop partnerships with non-Arab regional actors in the Eastern Mediterranean – Greece, Cyprus, and Israel.

One year after the 2015 discovery of Egypt's Zohr natural gas field and the deepening of cooperation between Cairo and Nicosia as a result, the UAE opened an embassy in the Republic of Cyprus. The 2016 diplomatic breakthrough followed Nicosia's awarding two concession agreements to the UAE's marine terminals operator, DP World, for Cyprus' Limassol port. In March 2017, UAE participated in Greece's Iniochos multi-national joint air force exercise. The landmark Emirati participation in the 11-day exercise hosted by the Hellenic Air Force was strategically significant in several aspects. Concurrent with Iniochos 2017, the UAE hosted a major joint military exercise with Egypt. The joint exercise named Zayed 2 involved ground,

naval, and air forces from the two nations, as well as marine units drilling beach landing operations. The UAE deepened its military cooperation with Greece by repeating its participation in the annual Iniochos exercise in April 2019.

These exercises created sufficient interoperability with the Hellenic Air Force to enable Emirati fighter pilots to fly with their Greek and French counterparts in August 2020 as a show solidarity with Athens in its Eastern Mediterranean stand-off with Ankara, while Egyptian sailors did the same on the waters' surface. On November 18, 2020 Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis travelled to Abu Dhabi to sign strategic partnership and defence agreements with the UAE.<sup>13</sup>

The 2017 Iniochos exercises also marked the first time Emirati combat pilots publicly flew alongside their Israeli counterparts in joint air force exercises, despite the fact that the UAE and Israel then had no formal diplomatic ties. Israel had already established strong defence ties with Greece following the 2010 breakdown in security cooperation between Israel and Turkey. By 2015, Israel and Greece had signed a status of forces agreement (SOFA), being the first SOFA Israel signed with any other nation aside from the United States. Emirati and Israeli combat pilots flew together again in Iniochos 2019 and by August 2020 the UAE and Israel signed an agreement to normalize their relations. The Israeli-Emirati and Greek-Emirati agreements mark the full entrance of the UAE into the broad Eastern Mediterranean alignment.

The Iniochos 2017 exercises also featured the participation of Turkey's NATO allies the United States and Italy. The inclusion of pilots from Turkey's Middle Eastern strategic rival, the UAE, in an ostensibly Eastern Mediterranean exercise involving the air forces of three NATO members strongly reinforced the impression that NATO was no longer an even-handed broker in the Eastern Mediterranean and was acting to contain Turkish power in the region. The 2017 exercise was an early sign to Ankara that, despite Rome's commonalities with Turkey on the Libya question, Italy could potentially change its orientation and tilt very far in its support of Greece and Cyprus.

### **Turkey's Rise as a Trans-Mediterranean Power: Qatar partnership and forward-bases**

Turkey aspires to act as an inter-regional power that will set the terms for a new pattern of connectivity between Europe, Africa, and Asia. While the Turkey-Greece maritime boundary dispute for Turkey is a fundamental issue about the sovereignty of the Turkish Republic itself, the dispute as well as the other core Eastern Mediterranean conflicts are also strategically important for Turkey's position in the Mediterranean regional system – specifically Turkey's ability to act in the Eastern Mediterranean to create its own trans-Mediterranean connectivity to advance its ambitions to be an inter-regional power.

Turkey, under the ruling Justice and Development Party, originally promoted its agenda of inter-regional connectivity with a policy dubbed "Zero problems with neighbours." Associated with Turkey's then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the policy expressed Turkey's aspiration of "creating a zone of peace and stability, starting from her neighbours."<sup>14</sup> Placing Turkey's soft power resources at the forefront of its approach, the policy emphasized that "Security for all, political dialogue, economic interdependence and cultural harmony are the building blocks of this vision."<sup>15</sup>

While promising at the outset, the policy faltered on its highly counter-productive execution that reinforced scepticism and intransigence among most of Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean neighbours, leaving Ankara isolated in the region by 2014. In that year, Turkey watched a hostile government in Egypt entrench its power and the launching of the French, Egyptian, and Emirati-backed military campaign of General Khalifa Haftar in Libya. The year also witnessed the Iranian-Hezbollah military intervention in neighbouring Syria that was followed in 2015 by Russia's military intervention and the U.S. military partnership with the People's Protection Units, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organization, despite Ankara's objections.

With its soft power tools seemingly ineffective to influence the outcome of these and other events, Turkey opted for the use of hard power instruments in the Mediterranean basin and Middle East, charting a new strategic course and turning to Qatar as its main strategic partner. In December 2014, Ankara and Doha concluded an agreement for the forward-deployment of Turkish forces in Qatar. The April 2016 opening of Turkey's \$39 million Tariq bin Ziyad base marked the beginning of Ankara's program to develop forward-bases that eventually resulted in its large military presence in Libya. Housing Turkish ground forces plus units from the Turkey's naval, air, and special operations forces, Turkey's base in Qatar will likely see the stationing of 5,000 Turkish military personnel.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey's new expeditionary posture originated as the logical outcome of Turkey's strategic reorientation resulting from the conclusion of the Cold War,<sup>17</sup> but Turkey's shift to a foreign policy preference for 'coercive diplomacy' in the Mediterranean basin stemmed from its growing sense of isolation from both its NATO allies and its non-NATO Mediterranean neighbours. The shift became entrenched following the July 15, 2016 failed coup attempt against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The lack of a robust response from the U.S. and Turkey's other major NATO allies in support of the President Erdoğan and his government was seen in Ankara as an unconscionable breach of trust and cemented Turkey's resolve to assert itself as an independent regional power.

With an eye on establishing the sea lines of communication through the Eastern Mediterranean-Red Sea corridor to Qatar, Turkey opened, on September 30, 2017, a military facility in Mogadishu, Somalia.<sup>18</sup> Turkey's \$50 million, 4 square km Mogadishu base is its largest training facility outside Anatolia, expected to train 10,000 Somali troops.<sup>19</sup> The Turkish military is able to house assets for its own naval, air, and ground forces. Turkey's base provides Ankara with a position reasonably close to the Gulf of Aden, the eastern entry into the Eastern Mediterranean-Red Sea corridor critical for the operation of the Turkey-Qatar partnership.

Thus, as the UAE advanced its full participation in the Franco-Egyptian Mediterranean axis by joining Greece's Iniochos joint air force exercises in 2017, Turkey had succeeded in establishing its own trans-Mediterranean connectivity with Africa and the Persian Gulf as a counter-measure. In 2018, Turkey was poised to achieve a further trans-Mediterranean breakthrough with Sudan's agreement to lease its Suakin port on the Red Sea to Turkey for the construction of a dual-use civilian/naval facility.<sup>20</sup> After the announcement of Turkey's Suakin acquisition, Egypt sent hundreds of troops to the United Arab Emirates' base in Eritrea, located on the opposite coastal border with Sudan.<sup>21</sup> Turkey's effort to secure Sudan's Suakin port as dual-use facility was ultimately stymied by Sudan's 2019 change of government to a pro-Cairo and

pro-Abu Dhabi regime financially backed by the UAE. The new Sudanese government would eventually normalize its relations with Israel in 2020 following the UAE's example.

In parallel to its efforts in Sudan, Ankara, in 2018, also approached the GNA government in Tripoli to create a sustained Turkish military presence in Libya. The framework for the two November 2019 Turkey-GNA agreements on their Mediterranean maritime boundary and their defence cooperation was hammered out a year earlier during the November 5, 2018 deliberations conducted in Tripoli by Turkey's defence minister,<sup>22</sup> just thirteen months after the opening Turkey's military base in Mogadishu.

Turkey's purpose in declaring its maritime border with Libya, according to the December 1, 2019 public statement of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>23</sup> was to pressure the international community and the Eastern Mediterranean countries to devise an equitable settlement for the region's maritime boundaries upon which Eastern Mediterranean offshore energy development depends. Irrespective of these issues, Turkey also confronts the possibility that joint action by the Hellenic and Egyptian navies in the event of hostilities could close off the Mediterranean to Turkey by forming a maritime *cordon sanitaire* from the outer islands the Dodecanese (Rhodes, Karpathos, Kasos) to Crete and then to the North African coast at the Eastern Libya/Western Egypt border region. The establishment of a naval base on the Libyan coast therefore forms a strategic *desiradatum* for Turkey to counter this contingency.

Turkey's overt military intervention during the first half of 2020 to preserve Libya's GNA has created an important strategic beachhead for Turkey in the centre of the southern Mediterranean. Having become the GNA's security guarantor, Turkey is cementing its status as a major trans-Mediterranean power. Turkey's considerable air force presence at the re-captured al-Watayah air base, located 27 km from the Tunisian border, and its developing naval presence in the GNA coastal stronghold of Misrata have increased Ankara's clout in Tunis as well as in Algiers. Turkey's new outsized military presence in Libya now serves as a platform from which Ankara can promote its program to create trans-Mediterranean commercial connectivity via the central Maghreb.

Already in 2019, Turkey became the largest exporter to Libya after China, surpassing the EU and earning Turkey \$1.53 billion in revenue.<sup>24</sup> In Algeria, Ankara has already started to make a strong inroads through Turkey's \$3.5 billion dollars of investments, ranking Turkey as one of the country's top foreign investors.<sup>25</sup> One month into Turkey's game-changing Libya intervention, Turkey's President Erdoğan visited Algeria on January 26, 2020, where he declared Algeria as "one of our strategic partners in North Africa," explaining, "Algeria is one of Turkey's most important gateways to the Maghreb and Africa."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Turkey's strategic partner Qatar, with approximately \$3 billion of investments in Tunisia,<sup>27</sup> now ranks as Tunisia's second largest investor, behind France but having leapfrogged ahead of Italy.<sup>28</sup> Turkey, in partnership with Qatar, has reasserted itself as a Mediterranean-wide power and one of the primary actors in establishing trans-Mediterranean connectivity.

## Italy's Ambiguous Alignments

Although Turkey's intervention preserved the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, in whose western Libyan territory almost all of Italy's considerable energy assets are concentrated, Turkey's outsized military presence has rendered Italy's vital economic interests vulnerable to Ankara's dictates. Italy had already moved closer to France in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2018 to mitigate risk to its energy interests in Cyprus from Turkish interference. As Turkey starts to leverage its status as Tripoli's security guarantor to obtain contracts in Libya's energy sector and infrastructure development, Italy seems to be on the verge of a tipping point where it may shift away from Turkey toward a Mediterranean-wide strategic partnership with France and Egypt. However, the extent of such a shift, if it occurs at all,<sup>29</sup> remains to be seen.

Italian energy major Eni, the leading foreign energy operator in Libya, controls about 45% of Libya's oil and natural gas production. Italy is the only market destination for Libya's natural gas exports. In 2019, Libya supplied 5.4 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Italy, equivalent to 8% of Italy's natural gas demand.<sup>30</sup> And it is not just Libya that Italy's Eni feels vulnerable. In Algeria, Africa's top natural gas producer, Eni is one of the leading foreign partners of Algeria's state oil company Sonatrach. Eni and Sonatrach jointly own the 1,500-mile Trans-Mediterranean pipeline that transports Algerian natural gas via Tunisia to Sicily and the Italian mainland. In 2019, natural gas from Algeria and Libya combined accounted for 28 percent Italy's natural gas imports.<sup>31</sup>

Although the desire to preserve Italy's substantial energy interests in Libya has been a principal motivation for Rome's tilt toward Turkey, Rome's outreach to Ankara has also been part of Italy's own strategic pivot to prioritize the Mediterranean basin – a rebalancing that has seen Italy's exports to Mediterranean markets outstrip Italian exports to the United States and China respectively.<sup>32</sup> Italy has surpassed France to become Europe's second largest manufacturer, whose value of sold production exceeds France's value by approximately one-third.<sup>33</sup> This has rendered the balance of power between Italy and France in the Mediterranean no longer tenable. Despite Italy's manufacturing advances and proximity to the Mediterranean's southern shores, Italy's development of markets in North Africa has been constrained by France's super-sized influence, prompting Rome's outreach to Ankara.

Until the advent of French President Emmanuel Macron's government recent focus on the Mediterranean and his so-called *Pax Mediterranea*,<sup>34</sup> Paris had been unwilling to allow its relationship with Rome to develop greater parity. However, Turkey's military power moves in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya seem to have changed the strategic calculus in both Paris and Rome, providing momentum for a comprehensive Franco-Italian rapprochement.<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion: The Strategic Urgency of the Eastern Mediterranean Solutions**

A strategic urgency now exists to resolve each of the three core conflicts before the trans-regional dynamics of the Mediterranean's Great Game reduces the ability of the Eastern Mediterranean actors themselves to resolve what are fundamentally local issues. The contributions by the other authors in this volume on the Eastern Mediterranean actors provide important insights into the problems as well as a measure the political distance that must be travelled to resolve them

Russia, which maintains air and naval bases in Syria and has its own military presence in Libya, announced in November 2020 that it would construct a base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. Russia's own trans-Mediterranean aspirations are factor in the strategic equation, and the contribution on Russia in this volume provides an important window into Moscow's perspective that is often missing in the conversation.

For both NATO and the EU, already divided by the Eastern Mediterranean conflicts, the stakes are very high as explained by the two respective contributions in this volume. Without the implementation of a coherent and effective policy on the part of each – and in coordination with one another as both our contributors both argue – NATO and the EU will continue to be weakened by the geopolitical convulsions of the Mediterranean's new Great Game.

Moreover, as the scramble for trans-Mediterranean connectivity continues to intensify, Arab Middle Eastern politics will feature more prominently in the Mediterranean's future strategic equation. The contribution in this volume on Jordan and the Arab Middle Eastern perspective provides a valuable perspective for further consideration of this factor.

A reordering of power relations is in progress across the Mediterranean regional system. The competition involves a scramble to establish patterns of trans-Mediterranean connectivity in which the various confluences of interests between the four major Mediterranean actors – Egypt, Turkey, France, and Italy – and their respective Middle Eastern and North African partners are increasingly setting the geopolitical agenda of the Mediterranean basin. In the absence of vigorous, coherent, and coordinated policies coming from the European Union and NATO, relations in the Eastern Mediterranean could become even more volatile. At the same time, equitable solutions to the Greek-Turkey maritime boundary dispute, the Cyprus problem, and the Libya conflict rooted both in the rule of law and *realpolitik* carry the potential now to positively impact the entire Mediterranean region – providing a reset moment for EU-Turkey relations as well as for the future of EU-MENA cooperation.

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<sup>2</sup> Michaël Tanchum, "Italy and Turkey's Europe-to-Africa Commercial Corridor: Rome and Ankara's Geopolitical Symbiosis Is Creating a New Mediterranean Strategic Paradigm".

<sup>3</sup> See the contributions by Çıraklı, Grigoriadis, and Ongun in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Economy and Finances holds 4.6% and CDP S.p.A holds another 25.96%, being the Public Investment Bank of Italy; <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/about-us/governance/shareholders.html>

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<sup>8</sup> See the contributions by Çıraklı and Grigoriadis in this volume

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# TRNC-RoC Cooperation: A Critical Missing Piece for Eastern Mediterranean Stability

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Recent offshore natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have focused international attention on the possible political and economic impact of these resources on the region and beyond. For Cyprus, which remains divided following the *de facto* partition of the island in 1974, the discovery of offshore natural gas also raised expectations that the development of island's gas resources would provide a much-needed impetus for the resolution to the decades-old Cyprus dispute. Regional bickering however, hard on the heels of the "gas bonanza," has not only dimmed hopes for a breakthrough regarding the Cyprus problem but has stoked tensions between the two guarantor powers, Greece and Turkey, to new heights. The lack of an agreement concerning the exploitation and equitable sharing of the gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean, inextricably linked to the Cyprus problem, now increases the chances for a dangerous Greek-Turkish clash, exacerbating the already contentious maritime stand-off between Turkey and Greece in the Aegean Sea and the high stakes jockeying over the future balance of power in the wider region resulting from foreign intervention in the Libyan civil war.

## The Eastern Mediterranean's Energy Geopolitics

From a Greek Cypriot perspective, Ankara is to blame for the current escalation of tensions between Greece and Turkey resulting from Ankara's decision to send a research vessel to explore for energy resources in the Aegean Sea. In addition to supporting Greek claims to sovereignty over most of the Aegean, Greek Cypriots also accuse Ankara of illegally operating within their own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Essentially, the Greek Cypriot position is that they represent the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and, as such, they have a sovereign right to explore and develop the island's natural resources. In that vein, the RoC has been raising its objections with the United Nations and the European Union over Turkey's gas exploration and drilling activities in Cypriot waters, asserting that Turkish actions violate its sovereign rights while pointing out that Turkish Cypriots will also benefit from revenue that may come from drilling. To that end, the RoC has offered Turkish Cypriots a share of possible gas revenues if Ankara recognises the RoC's sovereign rights over the island's energy resources.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey, for its part, objects to the EEZ claims of the Greek Cypriot side on the grounds that A) it denies the co-ownership rights of the Turkish Cypriot community, B) does not respect the rights and interests of all stakeholders, and C) distorts the equitable delimitation of maritime boundaries under the principles of international law.<sup>2</sup> Another Turkish grievance is with regards to its perceived isolation from the deepening cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Italy in the East Med pipeline project to connect the gas reserves of the eastern Mediterranean to Greece. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which was established in September 2020 as an international organization by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, also excludes Turkey. While the EMGF has an 'open door policy' for membership and has received an application from France to join, and from the United States

and European Union requesting observer status, Turkey has insisted that it was left outside, and has blamed the EMGF for taking Greece and Cyprus's side. The recent partnering of regional heavyweights Italy and France in energy cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean (and more remarkably, in Libya<sup>3</sup>) to counter Ankara's presence in the region has further stoked up Turkish fears that there would be no role for Ankara in the new energy landscape. The deepening security cooperation between the Mediterranean countries along with trilateral RoC-Greece-Israel defence relationship and the strengthening military cooperation between the RoC and France are also seen by Ankara as the initiation of a new, anti-Turkish geopolitical front with France at its helm. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's recent assertion that "it is absolutely not a coincidence that those who seek to exclude us from the eastern Mediterranean are the same invaders as the ones who attempted to invade our homeland a century ago"<sup>4</sup> underscores such Turkish anxieties of being 'confined to its shores'.

The persistent Greek Cypriot position moreover, that, as the "recognised authority" for the whole island, they will not discuss their hydrocarbon initiatives with the Turkish Cypriot side, has provoked a strong reaction not only from Ankara but also from the Turkish Cypriots, who responded by signing their own maritime boundary agreement that delineates the continental shelf between the Turkish coast and the north of the island, subsequently embarking on joint gas exploration with Turkey.

### **Turkish Cypriot positions**

Under the present circumstances, the RoC is administered solely by the Greek Cypriot community, with its *de facto* authority restricted to the southern part of the island. In the north, the Turkish Cypriot community proclaimed in 1983 their own state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The TRNC's current position is that Turkish Cypriots are the co-founders of the bi-communal RoC that broke down in 1963. Since 1963, there has been no legitimate authority that can represent Cyprus as a whole, that is, both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. The latter, as co-owner, has thus objected to the signing of maritime boundary agreements on behalf of the whole island by the Greek Cypriot side on the grounds that these proceedings are being conducted without their participation or consent.

The RoC's October 2008 granting of the first gas exploration license to the US-based firm Noble Energy for the 'Aphrodite' gas field was the opening salvo in the dispute between the TRNC and the RoC over the energy resources. Then TRNC President Mehmet Ali Talat gave voice to Turkish Cypriot objections in a letter of protest to the UN. As Talat's November 2008 letter stated:

The Greek Cypriot side's unilateral activities regarding the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean before a comprehensive settlement prejudice and violate the fundamental rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriot people who were the equal co-founding partner in the 1960 Republic of Cyprus and thus have equal rights and say over the natural resources of the island and the sea areas of the Island of Cyprus [...] Greek Cypriot Administration, purporting to act as if it is the legitimate Government of the Republic of Cyprus, represents exclusively the Greek Cypriot people and does not have any authority to conduct exploratory surveys [...] negotiate and conclude agreements on behalf of Cyprus as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Taking “reciprocal steps of equal significance,” the TRNC has also put in place its own arrangements and issued its own gas exploration licensing blocks, in close coordination with Turkey in response to the Greek Cypriot actions. Noble Energy's drilling eventually began on 19 September 2011, prompting the TRNC to respond more robustly by signing a Continental Shelf Delimitation Agreement with Turkey on 21 September 2011. This was immediately followed by the 22 September 2011 signing of a licensing agreement with Turkish Petroleum (TP) for the exploration and development of oil and gas in waters that overlap with parts of licensing blocks 8, 9, and 12 issued by the RoC on the basis of the RoC's EEZ demarcation. The agreement with TP was ratified by the TRNC Parliament on 9 January 2012 and the Turkish Parliament on 29 June 2012. Describing the move to grant licences to TP as “a step to protect the legitimate rights and interests of Turkish Cypriots,” TRNC officials have asserted that the agreement was “entirely the consequence of the Greek Cypriot side's commencement to drill on 19 September 2011 in total disregard of the existence of Turkish Cypriots.”<sup>6</sup>

Aside from putting in place its own legal framework and initiating exploration activities in the island's maritime regions, the TRNC has also proposed on several occasions that the two sides work together to jointly developing the island's natural gas resources. The first proposal was made by then TRNC President Derviş Eroğlu<sup>7</sup> during talks with the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in New York on 24 September 2011 – two days after the TRNC signed a licensing agreement with the TP. Reiterating the joint Turkish/Turkish Cypriot position that the the agreement was entirely the consequence of the Greek Cypriot side's unilateral actions, and that TRNC nonetheless prioritized joint development, Eroğlu proposed that the RoC and the TRNC either “jointly halt all hydrocarbon-exploration activity” until an urgently needed comprehensive settlement was reached or form a joint “ad hoc committee,” with UN participation, that would be responsible for the “joint operation of all hydrocarbon activities.”<sup>8</sup> Both options were rejected by the Greek Cypriot side. As the RoC government spokesman Stephanos Stephanou explained “[. . .] exploration and exploitation of our natural resources constitutes a sovereign right of the Republic of Cyprus [. . .] our sovereign right is not negotiable. This is clear.”<sup>9</sup>

The TRNC renewed its offer on 29 September 2012, when Eroğlu proposed the appointment of an independent intermediary by the UN Secretary-General to broker an agreement on A) how the two sides could work together; B) how the revenues from gas resources could be shared; and C) into which sectors these revenues could be channelled. The Turkish Cypriot position, explicated in a “talking paper,” was that revenues should primarily be used to finance the implementation of an eventual comprehensive settlement.<sup>10</sup> The Greek Cypriot side turned down this offer as well.

In October 2014, the situation escalated when Turkish warships escorted TP's seismic research vessel *Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa* to explore for natural gas off the coast of Cyprus. The action prompted the RoC to break off the peace talks that were being held under the UN auspices. In April 2015 Mustafa Akıncı, a left-leaning moderate known for his cooperation with the Greek Cypriot side during his tenure as mayor of Nicosia in the 1990s, succeeded Eroğlu as the TRNC President. By May 2015, talks between the TRNC and the RoC resumed following a seven-month hiatus. Akıncı's election was regarded as providing new momentum for the peace talks and created the expectation for a pause in the high-paced energy developments while the negotiations continued in Mont Pelerin (2017), Crans Montana (2017) and Berlin (2019). Yet with

the faltering of hopes for a breakthrough in the peace talks, the hydrocarbons issue was left simmering.

In February 2018, RoC announced the discovery of the Calypso field, a find up to twice the volume of gas reserves as the previously discovered Aphrodite field. Three days after that, Turkish military vessels stopped an Eni drillship that was on its way to drill in Block 3 of RoC's EEZ, southeast of Famagusta, in a region where Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot maritime claims overlap. Moreover, Akıncı's warning that "by continuing their unilateral drilling and exploration activities," the Greek Cypriots would leave the Turkish Cypriot side "no other option than to launch their own hydrocarbon explorations together with Turkey"<sup>11</sup> fell on deaf ears.

On 13 June 2019, in his meeting with Elizabeth Spehar, Special Representative and Head of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, Akıncı once again put forward the TRNC's long-standing proposal calling on the Greek Cypriot side to cooperate in developing the island's energy resources. On the same day, Akıncı sent Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades a detailed proposal involving the establishment of a joint committee under UN supervision that would consist of an equal number of members from the two communities as well as an independent observer. Akıncı's proposal also outlined the structure, targets, and procedures of the committee, included the establishment of a revenue-sharing fund and details on how that fund would be used.<sup>12</sup> Details of the proposal were also shared with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the European Commission, and the then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini. The following day, 14 July 2019, the Turkish Cypriot daily *Kıbrıs Postası* published an op-ed penned by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, confirming Turkey's full support for Akıncı's proposal to the Greek Cypriot side and stressing that cooperation in the exploration and exploitation of gas around Cyprus could contribute to a settlement, as well as stability and peace in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> In his op-ed, Çavuşoğlu also asserted that Turkey would continue operations in areas where Turkish Cypriot authorities had granted licenses to TP until the Greek Cypriots agreed to cooperate with their Turkish Cypriot counterparts. No response was issued to the new proposal. On 8 July 2019, TP sent its second drill ship, *Yavuz*, southeast of the Karpaz Peninsula to start drilling operations. This was swiftly followed by a set of EU sanctions<sup>14</sup> on Ankara for "illegal drilling" and an ensuing war of words that continued into the summer of 2020. In August 2020, following the signing of a maritime deal between Greece and Egypt – days after Ankara said it would postpone its oil and gas explorations as a goodwill gesture – *Yavuz* was sent back to resume its operations around the island.

## The Emerging Challenge

Turkey's commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean has naturally galvanised a certain penchant within the EU for a more punitive approach toward Ankara. While not wholly representative of the EU's position, since Berlin is clearly interested in trying to reach a balance in the Greece-Turkey confrontation, recent calls by the RoC, Greece, and also France to impose further sanctions on Turkey for its activities around Cyprus has alarmed the Turkish Cypriot side.

Turkish Cypriots have been disappointed by Brussels ever since the latter gave the Greek Cypriots the "green light" for membership before a solution to the Cyprus problem had been concluded. In this vein, TRNC officials argue that refusal to discuss the gas resources with the Turkish Cypriot side is a continuation of the RoC's longstanding obstructionist posture that now

exploits its EU membership to cloak its underlying objective of not sharing power with the Turkish Cypriots. As the former TRNC Foreign Minister and once the chief negotiator in peace talks, Kudret Özersay, has put it:

The Greek Cypriot leadership, continuously refusing to share power and prosperity with the Turkish Cypriot People, acts under the illusion that it is the only authority on the island who has right of say at the expense of our rights. Even under these circumstances, the Turkish Cypriot side has put forward constructive proposals for cooperation. The usurpationist [sic] Greek Cypriot mentality, which constantly rejects our proposals for cooperation, presumes that by doing so, the Turkish Cypriot People will give up on its rights on the hydrocarbon resources which belong to both sides. It should be understood that, the Turkish Cypriot side, in cooperation with Turkey, will continue to protect its rights and interests and will not surrender to this understanding.<sup>15</sup>

U.S. policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean too, according to the Turkish Cypriot side, risks jeopardizing the already fragile peace process and could further destabilize the region. Turkish Cypriots are disturbed by Washington's September 2020 decision, amidst the surge in tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, to partially lift its decades-old restrictions on arms sales to the RoC. Strong opposition to the U.S. decision was voiced uniformly by Turkish Cypriot parties across the political spectrum. Usually at odds with one another over the reunification of the island, the universal Turkish Cypriot dismay over the United States' shifting position in the Eastern Mediterranean, coupled with frustration at the EU's ongoing inability to exert any leverage over the RoC, could provide momentum to Turkish Cypriot political currents opposed to reunification.

There is a growing conviction in the TRNC (also echoed, albeit tentatively in Europe and elsewhere) that the RoC's refusal to discuss the gas resources with the Turkish Cypriot side is a reflection of the wider Greek Cypriot unwillingness to accept the Turkish Cypriots as co-equal partners in government. Reflective also of the strong popular disillusionment with the peace process, frustration with the Greek Cypriot side even led the moderate Akıncı to somewhat change his tone.

As the successive rounds of talks held in 2017 and 2018 between the two sides, along with the guarantor nations of Turkey and Greece, ended in deadlock, Akıncı began indicating that he and Anastasiades no longer shared the same vision of what constituted a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation and that the latter was not prepared to give Turkish Cypriot political equality they sought. After his latest proposal was rejected by the Greek Cypriot side, Akıncı said that it was "not the Turkish Cypriot side which is responsible today for not having a results-oriented negotiation process towards a settlement, but the Greek Cypriot side that adamantly opposes the political equality and effective participation of the Turkish Cypriots"<sup>16</sup>. He also asserted that "the Greek Cypriot side, in an attempt to act unilaterally over the issue in complete disregard of the Turkish Cypriot people, prefers a politics of tension."<sup>17</sup> While the RoC clings to its exclusionary position regarding the gas resources, backed by a line-up of what the TRNC and Turkey perceive as an anti-Turkish front, it is quite possible that Turkish Cypriot positions will only harden further. Indeed, the recent victory of Ersin Tatar, a right-wing hardliner who has long advocated a two-state solution and closer ties with Turkey, in the TRNC presidential

elections held on 18 October 2020 indicates a major shift in the Turkish Cypriot position away from the bi-zonal, bi-communal federation that Akıncı had championed.

## Conclusion

TRNC officials have consistently voiced their opposition to the offshore initiatives of the RoC. They maintain that the exclusion of Turkish Cypriots from this process is inconsistent with the international accords that established the RoC in 1960. In this regard, the exploitation of the island's shared natural resources without Turkish Cypriot participation, the TRNC asserts, is unilateral, hence illegal. A further Turkish Cypriot assertion is that the ongoing unilateral exploration is a violation of the pledge to share natural resources, and undermines the already fragile reunification talks.

It is unlikely that the Turkish Cypriots will sit by idly watching the eroding of their rights and equal status by the RoC render them "subordinate" to their Greek counterparts. For many in the TRNC, the vague Greek Cypriot promises to share gas revenues in the future add insult to injury. The general mood in the TRNC also seems to be that Turkish Cypriots did what they could and that the proposals for joint development of the island's natural gas gave the Greek Cypriots ample room for compromise. But the main missed opportunity for Cyprus, the TRNC continues to argue, remains the failure to resolve the Cyprus problem, which holds back the development of the whole island on all fronts, not just the hydrocarbons.

Whether the RoC will take heed of the TRNC's warnings remains unclear. It is certain that, without a change in the Greek Cypriot's policy posture, the alienation of Turkish Cypriots will deepen, the gulf between the EU and Turkey will widen, and chances for a Greece-Turkey confrontation will increase. Though a narrow victory for Tatar — securing 51.7 percent of the vote which translates to a majority of only 4,412 votes — the result of the presidential race in the TRNC may also now embolden an already frustrated Turkey, both over the Cyprus problem and over the hydrocarbons, to plead more assertively for a two-state solution should the RoC fail to agree on a federal settlement that guarantees political equality for the Turkish Cypriots. That is sure to present all the actors in the Eastern Mediterranean with difficult decisions in the near future.

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# The Eastern Mediterranean as an Emerging Crisis Zone: Greece and Cyprus in a Volatile Regional Environment

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## Introduction

The recent escalation in Greek-Turkish relations, the most serious since the beginning of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement in 1999, could be attributed to four factors: the energy scramble in the Eastern Mediterranean, the non-resolution of the Cyprus problem, Turkey's direct involvement in the Libyan civil war and domestic developments leading to the mainstreaming of the "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) doctrine. The dispute between Greece and Turkey on the delimitation of their respective maritime zones in the Mediterranean is not a new one. The two countries have disagreed about their maritime borders since the 1970s. In the context of improving EU-Turkey relations following the December 1999 Helsinki European Council decision granting Turkey the status of an EU candidate state, the resolution of the long-standing dispute was linked to bilateral negotiations. If these failed, both states pledged by the end of 2004 to refer the dispute to adjudication in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).<sup>1</sup> The adjudication opportunity was missed in December 2004, when the Greek government of the time avoided raising the issue and forfeited the chance of making the Turkish government, then eager to start accession negotiations with the European Union, jointly refer their maritime disputes to the ICJ.<sup>2</sup> The dispute remained shelved for about fifteen years until it raised international attention again in summer 2020. There are several reasons that this dispute has both been rekindled and had its focal points shifted from the waters of the Aegean to those of the Lycian Sea. This study argues that the discovery of sizeable natural gas reserves under the seabed of the Eastern Mediterranean, the lack of resolution of the Cyprus problem, Turkey's increased engagement in Libya's civil war, and domestic political developments in Turkey that led to the adoption of the "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine have all contributed to the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a new conflict zone between Greece and Turkey. These developments have shaped the responses of the governments of Greece and Cyprus to the emerging volatility in the region.

## Four Factors Destabilizing the Eastern Mediterranean

### *Natural Gas Discoveries and Their Monetization Puzzle*

The first factor was the discovery of sizeable natural gas reserves in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Cyprus, Egypt and Israel. Israel's success with the Leviathan natural gas field in December 2010 triggered further interest in exploration in the EEZs of Cyprus and Egypt. The December 2011 discovery of the Aphrodite natural gas field and the August 2015 discovery of the Zohr natural gas field within the limits of the Cypriot and the Egyptian EEZs respectively raised international attention to the prospect of the Eastern Mediterranean becoming an energy exporter as well as the outstanding international disputes in the region.<sup>3</sup> This raised the stakes of maritime zone delimitation in the region<sup>4</sup> and attracted the interest of great powers

and major energy companies. At the onset, it was possible to view these discoveries as an opportunity for promoting regional cooperation,<sup>5</sup> even providing economic incentives and a monetary cushion to solve the Cyprus problem.<sup>6</sup> While the first finds were certainly promising, unfounded optimism occluded the fact that successful monetization required additional discoveries and a regional political consensus.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, unilateralist and non-inclusive views regarding exploration and monetization prevailed throughout the region.

### *The Cyprus Problem and its Spill over*

The second factor is the lack of resolution of the Cyprus problem. The protraction of the Cyprus problem continues having a toxifying effect on Greek-Turkish relations, no matter how “settled” the current status-quo may look to some. While no violent incidents have been recorded on the Green Line for over twenty years, the Cyprus problem has obstructed regional cooperation, and energy monetization could be no exception. The decision of the Republic of Cyprus to conduct exploration and drilling operations in its EEZ raised the question of the effective participation of the Turkish Cypriot community, which has not participated in state structures since the outbreak of the 1963-1964 crisis. Turkey’s objection to the delimitation of the Cypriot EEZ as such added to the confrontation and raised tensions in a region near the meeting point of the Greek and Turkish EEZs. Especially following the failure of the Crans Montana Cyprus conference in August 2017, the decision of the Republic of Cyprus to resume energy exploration by issuing licenses to companies like Eni, Total and Exxon Mobil raised the regional stakes. Yet the February 2018 decision of the Italy’s Eni to withdraw its drill ship from the Cypriot EEZ due to the presence of Turkish military vessels in its vicinity demonstrated that energy corporations were not willing to ignore the political risk of energy monetization in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### *Turkey’s Libyan Gambit*

The third is Turkey’s increased interest in Libya and its ongoing civil war. While Turkey failed to endorse the 2011 uprising against the Qaddafi regime, due to its significant economic interests in the country, it became increasingly involved in factional conflict, following the 2014 outbreak of the Libyan civil war. Turkey’s firm support for the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the dispatch of Turkish troops in its support raised the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean sea lanes as a bridge connecting Libya and Turkey. It also gave Turkey, on 27 November 2019, the opportunity to sign a memorandum of understanding in blatant disregard for the EEZ rights of Greek islands. The signing of the Libyan-Turkish memorandum on the delimitation of the EEZs of the two countries in violation of Greek EEZ rights inevitably alarmed Greece and raised the stakes of the confrontation. No more limited to the southeasternmost part of the Greek EEZ, the maritime dispute between Athens and Ankara now cut across a wide swath of the Eastern Mediterranean.

### *The “Blue Homeland” Doctrine and Its Mainstreaming*

The fourth is the increasing influence on Turkish politics of a group of military officers and the gradual mainstreaming of their vision that brings Turkey’s strategic ambitions in the Mediterranean into contradiction with fundamental principles of international law as well as with its neighbours. Dubbed as “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*), this vision pledged to turn Turkey into a major naval power and consolidate its hegemonic role in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> Disagreeing with the development of international case law and the United Nations Convention

on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that affirms island coastlines, in principle, are considered the same as mainland coastlines when it comes to the delimitation of maritime zones, the advocates of the “Blue Homeland” doctrine claim large swaths of Greece's maritime zones for Turkey, in contravention to UNCLOS. While these views were marginalized during the first terms of the AKP administration, and some of the leading advocates for the doctrine in Turkey's senior military ranks faced criminal investigation and imprisonment on account of their alleged involvement in coup preparations in the *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) case, their status drastically shifted following the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Rehabilitated and restored to positions of influence within the Turkish military establishment, these officers began building a partnership with the AKP administration. Their “Mavi Vatan” vision gradually became mainstreamed, as pro-government media endorsed it and official statements started taking it into consideration. Turkey's involvement in the Libyan civil war and the complete dependence of the GNA side on Turkey facilitated the signature of the 27 November 2019 memorandum, which was hailed as the first step for the realisation of the “*Mavi Vatan*.”<sup>9</sup>

### The View from Greece

As the aforementioned developments were gradually shifting attention towards the Eastern Mediterranean, it was the signing of the 27 November 2019 Libyan-Turkish memorandum on maritime delimitation that acted as a catalyst for a more dynamic Greek foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece was left with no other recourse than to develop a closer interest in the regional conflicts and pursue a more proactive position in seeking bilateral agreements for delimitation of its maritime borders with its neighbours. Meanwhile, Greek-Turkish relations deteriorated on additional grounds. Bilateral tensions rose precipitously in early March 2020 when thousands of refugees and immigrants attempted to storm the Greek-Turkish border at Pazarkule/Kastaneai near Edirne, in what the Greek government considered as a premeditated attempt to weaponize the refugee question against Greece.<sup>10</sup> Relations soured further in July 2020 following the decision of the Turkish administration to convert the Hagia Sophia and Chora museums to mosques. Tensions peaked in summer 2020, following the dispatch of *Oruç Reis*, a Turkish maritime research vessel, on an exploration mission southeast of the Greek island of Megisti (Kastellorizo). By issuing consecutive NAVTEX orders for natural gas exploration operations in the Eastern Mediterranean in areas claimed by Cyprus and Greece as belonging to their own EEZs, Turkey aimed to reinforce its sovereignty claims over these maritime areas. Viewing acquiescence to the explorations as reinforcing Turkey's sovereign rights claim on these waters, Greece responded by sending naval vessels to protest the *Oruç Reis*' research activities, confronting the exploration vessel's Turkish naval escort. This military escalation reached a peak on 12 August when the Greek frigate *Lemnos* collided with the Turkish frigate *Kemal Reis*.

Meanwhile, Greece intensified its contacts with Italy and Egypt with the aim to conclude the long pending negotiations on the delimitations of their respective EEZs. The Greek efforts bore fruit: a Greek-Italian agreement was signed in Athens on 9 June 2020, while an Egyptian-Greek agreement was signed in Cairo on 6 August 2020. The signing of EEZ agreements with Italy and with Egypt marked a clear departure from decades of inflexibility that had rendered any agreement impossible. Through its EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt and Italy, Greece's government under Prime Minister Mitsotakis' leadership showed it possessed both the flexibility and the resolve to make mutually beneficial agreements based on UNCLOS.<sup>11</sup> While confirming UNCLOS as the applicable law, both agreements also showed a willingness to make

compromises from established Greek positions when deemed necessary. It also pointed to the fact that international law provided adequate tools for the delimitation of maritime zones in the Mediterranean. Either through negotiation or through adjudication, it is possible for states to reach mutually beneficial compromises that reinforce stability and raise prospects for economic cooperation in the region. Egypt, Greece, and Italy abstained from drawing the EEZ border to its meeting point with the EEZ of other neighbouring states. This showed flexibility and willingness to negotiate for the identification of the meeting points of the EEZs of Albania, Libya, Italy and Greece in the case of the Greek-Italian agreement and Libya, Egypt, Cyprus and Turkey in the case of the Egyptian-Greek agreement. Particularly important for the Eastern Mediterranean disputes was Greece's agreement with Egypt on the partial delimitation of their EEZs, since it challenged the Libyan-Turkish agreement of 27 November 2019, thereby raising an international legal dispute.

### **The View from Cyprus**

Cyprus signed agreements on the delimitation of its EEZ with its neighbouring states earlier, at a time before the Eastern Mediterranean's natural gas reserves became a hotly contested issue. By concluding agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007 and Israel in 2010, Cyprus appeared ready to capitalize on the 2011 discovery of the Aphrodite natural gas field in the southern part of its EEZ. On the other hand, the Cyprus problem remained a large obstacle to the monetization of Cypriot natural gas. Turkey, which refuses to recognize the Republic of Cyprus, started organizing its own explorations within the Cypriot EEZ, sometimes claiming to act on behalf of the unrecognized "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC) and sometimes claiming to exercise its own sovereign rights, on the basis of Turkey's paradoxical view that islands do not generate EEZs. While the international community did not recognize the latter claim, the fact that Turkish Cypriots had no effective participation in the decisions of the Republic of Cyprus undermined the legitimacy of the Cypriot actions.

As the August 2017 Crans Montana Cyprus conference failed to produce the hoped for resolution to the conflict, Cyprus placed more of its policy emphasis on the "EastMed" pipeline project that aspires to transport Eastern Mediterranean natural gas to Crete and mainland Greece – a project designed to bring together Cyprus, Greece, and Israel, while excluding Turkey. Despite the exorbitant cost and the technical challenges of the project,<sup>12</sup> it remained a prominent item in the regional political agenda. The discussion of building the East Med pipeline was a clear example of how politics prevailed upon economics, although economics would in the end dictate the feasibility of any project. On the other hand, it had significant regional cost, as it reinforced Turkish atavistic fears about being isolated or even encircled across the Eastern Mediterranean.

The attempt to isolate Turkey triggered Ankara's more unilateralist and assertive stance and led to the purchase of three research vessels *Barbaros*, *Fatih* and *Oruç Reis*, enabling Turkey's conduct of its own explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean and thereby attempt to stake its sovereignty claims. Eni's February 2018 decision not to challenge Turkey and withdraw its drill ship from waters within Cyprus' EEZ revealed the limits of the Cypriot natural gas monetization strategy. Sinking energy prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Turkey's military mobilization have contributed to an unfavourable commercial environment for investments in gas exploration and production in the Cypriot EEZ. Moreover, the EU's program for energy transition to non-carbon, renewable energy resources is making the case for monetizing the

Eastern Mediterranean natural gas even weaker. These factors have created a substantial financial cost to the Cypriot economy as a result of the delay in resolving the Cyprus problem.

## Conclusion

Gunboat diplomacy should not, and will not, work in the twenty-first century. All littoral states in the Eastern Mediterranean have sovereign rights and legitimate interests. International law provides a comprehensive framework for the resolution of these disputes. Defusing the tension and looking into win-win solutions meeting the fundamental concerns of all sides is the way forward. Through the conclusion of the EEZ agreements with Italy and Egypt, the Greek government showed its readiness to resolve Greece's outstanding disputes by taking into account the legitimate interests of their counterparts and making necessary compromises. Regarding the dispute with Turkey, the resumption of the bilateral exploratory talks that were interrupted in 2016 would be a necessary first step for agreeing to refer the outstanding disputes to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Turkey's accession and ratification of UNCLOS would be the best proof of its intentions to resolve the disputes on the basis of international law and to the mutual interest of all involved parties. It would be preposterous to expect from Greece to give up the provisions of the international law of the sea to appease Turkey's maximalist claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. The October 2020 decision of the Turkish government to recommence explorations in an Eastern Mediterranean region much closer to the island of Meis (Kastellorizo) than in August 2020 not only further alienated Turkey from its Western partners, as the cancellation of a visit of the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas showed. It also showed that the resumption of the bilateral exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey would not be an easy task.

Concerning Cyprus, the lack of resolution in the Cyprus problem has been the main obstacle to the monetization of the natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. Energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have so far contributed to the consolidation of the conflict and even its spill over into Greek-Turkish relations. Strong strategic vision needs to be shown by all parties in concluding the Cyprus peace negotiations, which in August 2017 came very close to a comprehensive agreement at Crans Montana. Removing the Cyprus question from the table would pave the ground for regional cooperation and an inclusive vision for the Eastern Mediterranean. This would not only ameliorate the political risk of any investment, it would also reduce extraction and transport costs, as the construction of an undersea pipeline to transport natural gas to Turkey remains the most commercially viable monetization method.<sup>13</sup> Reaching the international Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) markets via the existing Egyptian facilities at Idku and Damietta<sup>14</sup> would only be a partial solution, not addressing the long-term interests of involved parties. The optimal way to monetize the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon reserves would be through regional cooperation on the basis of international law. This becomes more evident under the pressure of low energy prices, the transition to a post-carbon economy, and the COVID-19 pandemic, as regional governments have neither the financial nor the technical capacity to proceed with projects of high engineering complexity and questionable economic viability. The window of opportunity for such a development is narrowing fast. Otherwise the most likely scenario is that the monetization of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean could well end up becoming yet another regional pipedream.

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# Turkey in an Increasingly Complex Eastern Mediterranean: How Turkey can Defend its Interests and Alleviate its Isolation in the Region

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As the crossroads between North-South and East-West geopolitical axes, the Eastern Mediterranean is a highly strategic region. The Eastern Mediterranean is the maritime gateway for Europe-Asia trade via the Suez Canal as well as the maritime gateway to the Middle East itself. The discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has added to region's strategic importance.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its offshore energy deposits, the Eastern Mediterranean plays vital role in the transport of Caspian basin energy, including oil from Central Asia and the South Caucasus via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline whose trans-shipment occurs via Turkey's oil port at Ceyhan.

The geopolitical and economic significance of the Eastern Mediterranean for Turkey cannot be overstated. The Eastern Mediterranean's natural gas reserves have brought the deeper involvement of the European Union (EU), the United States, and other global powers in the already pivotal region. The involvement of major powers from outside the region has transformed the geopolitical map of the Eastern Mediterranean and the nature Turkey's relations with its regional neighbours to the detriment of Turkey's vital national interests. Ankara's attempt to defend those interest have strained its relations with Turkey's allies in NATO and partners in the EU.

## The Emergence of the Current Tension in the Eastern Mediterranean

From Turkey's point of view, the policies pursued by the South Cyprus Greek Administration (SCGA) are at the source of the Eastern Mediterranean tensions. While it was necessary to reach an agreement with the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) regarding sharing of Cyprus' hydrocarbon reserves, the SCGA has unilaterally concluded a series of agreements to declare exclusive economic zones (EEZs) with neighbouring countries. It signed agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010, representing itself as the sole governing authority over the whole of the island.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to usurping the TRNC's authority, the SCGA, along with Greece, have tried to confine Turkey - the country with the longest mainland coastline in the Mediterranean - in an unjustly limited continental shelf and EEZ, the latter of which provides sovereign rights to offshore energy resources. One of the most important political objectives behind the SCGA's drilling activities is to entrench the *status quo* by shifting the agenda from negotiations for a settlement of Cyprus problem to obtaining international participation hydrocarbon exploration and production in order to create a *de facto* acknowledgment of the SCGA's authority and its maritime demarcations. Instead of regarding Cyprus' potential offshore hydrocarbon bonanza as an impetus to reach an equitable solution to the island's problems, the SCGA decided on 'the strategy to carry the Cyprus question into the sea.'

The SCGA unilaterally divided part of Cyprus's maritime zone into 13 licensing blocks for offshore energy exploration. Thus, the South Cypriot side has issued licences to international

energy companies in a maritime zone that was established by illicit treaties. Opening the region unilaterally to international companies such as the Exxon Mobil (U.S.), Total (France), Eni (Italy), Kogas (South Korea), and Novatek (Russia), for hydrocarbon exploration, the SCGA has turned the Eastern Mediterranean into an international conflict zone. In January 2019, the SCGA, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan established in Cairo the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, excluding Turkey and the TRNC. Although Turkey protested the further involvement of multinational corporations on every occasion as a violation of international law to the detriment of the TRNC as well as Turkey's own maritime boundaries, the South Cypriot side continued to invite international energy companies to the region.

In opposition to the SCGA's unilateral and unlawful agreements, Turkey and the TRNC concluded their own continental shelf delimitation agreement on 21 September 2011.<sup>3</sup> Following the delimitation agreement, the TRNC issued licenses to the Turkey Petroleum Joint Stock Company (TPAO) for exploration in blocks that the TRNC has designated, some of which overlap with the blocks designated by the SCGA. Moreover, some of the SCGA block's overlap with maritime region's claimed by Turkey. In 2018, TPAO sent its seismic exploration ship *Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha* and its drill ship *Fatih* to start conducting exploration operations, each accompanied Turkish naval escort. In 2019, TPAO sent an additional two ships, also accompanied by naval escort, to the region to further stake its claims. To protect the Turkish rights in the region, on 13 November 2019, Ankara sent a letter to the United Nations regarding the East Mediterranean continental shelf. The letter defined the borders of Turkey's continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean, which starts from west of the island of Cyprus and lies along the western territorial waters of islands located in the region.<sup>4</sup>

### **Turkey's Libya breakthrough and the new maritime stand-off with Greece**

The most consequential action by Turkey concerning the Eastern Mediterranean's maritime boundaries has been the 27 November 2019 conclusion of a memorandum of understanding regarding the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA). Concurrently, Turkey concluded a security and military cooperation memorandum with the GNA, which the Tripoli government subsequently activated in December 2019 resulting in the deployment of Turkish military assets and personnel in Libya. By delimiting part of its maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has staked its claim in international law, objecting to the highly limited maritime zone accorded to Turkey under the so-called Seville Map<sup>5</sup> or by any other means. In an attempt to obviate Turkey's agreement with Libya, Greece concluded its own maritime demarcation with Egypt ignoring the boundaries established between Ankara and the government in Tripoli. It was Greece's agreement with Egypt that triggered the current maritime stand-off between Turkey and Greece.

Ankara declared its determination not to allow Greece to poach the maritime areas under Turkish jurisdiction and its willingness to do whatever necessary to prevent any violation of its Turkey's maritime rights. In the crises previously experienced by Turkey and Greece in the Aegean Sea,<sup>6</sup> the United States intervened to de-escalate tensions between the two sides, with neither Ankara nor Athens relinquishing their positions. However, the current crisis between Turkey and Greece is not confined to the Aegean – through the Cyprus problem and the Libya conflict, the row between Turkey and Greece now involves new international alignments pitted against one another across the Eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>7</sup>

After the conclusion of the 10 August 2020 Greece-Egypt EEZ Agreement, Turkey issued a NAVTEX and started seismic research near the island of Kastellorizo, known as Meis in Turkish, that has been under Greek sovereignty since the 1947 Treaty of Paris to which Turkey was not a signatory. The NAVTEX defined a zone of operations within the Turkey's claimed continental shelf and inside the coordinates it shared with the UN. In opposition to this move, Greece too issued a NAVTEX and claimed the Turkish NAVTEX invalid. Three days after these developments, Greek and French battleships performed joint naval exercises, and fired their guns within the Turkish continental shelf and within the area designated in the Turkish NAVTEX. Thus, from Ankara's point of view, the joint naval exercise was a clear violation of the sovereignty of Turkish waters. Subsequently, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced Greece's preparations to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles. Greece continues its policy of escalating the tensions in Eastern Mediterranean by landing military units onto the islands of Ro (Karaada) and Kastellorizo (Meis).<sup>8</sup> The most important factor that enables Greece to engage in such provocative actions is the support it receives from its alliances and from the EU. The current crisis between the two countries is not the first problem between the two. However, the current situation differs markedly by the American stance that not only does not seek to end the crisis between the two NATO members but seeks to alter the balance of power between them. Further, the unprecedented siding of three Middle Eastern powers – Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel – with Greece differentiates this crisis from the previous crises and that increases the possibility of an armed conflict. Perhaps most significantly, the anti-Turkish posture on part of certain European Union (EU) member states, particularly France, has served to inflame tensions, making a solution to the crisis even harder to reach.

### **The European Union's policy stance and France as a disruptive influence**

France has taken a variety of stands against Turkey in the region from supporting the PKK-affiliated Kurdish PYD in Syria and the renegade commander Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya to providing support to Greece and the SCGA against Turkey in Eastern Mediterranean.

France hosted the annual summit of the seven EU South nations (also known as the 'Med7') on 10 September 2020 and pushed for a very strong stance against Turkey, resulting in the summit's concluding declaration: "We reiterate our full support and solidarity with Cyprus and Greece in the face of the repeated infringements on their sovereignty and sovereign rights, as well as confrontational actions by Turkey. We maintain that in absence of progress in engaging Turkey in a dialogue and unless it ends its unilateral activities, the EU is ready to develop a list of further restrictive measures that could be discussed at the European Council on 24-25 September 2020."<sup>9</sup> While Med7 declaration does not reflect the official position of the entire EU bloc, but is intended to influence the EU's consensus against Turkey. Although the Greek Cypriot side's call for sanctions against Turkey and Turkish companies was not immediately supported by Germany and several other countries at the September 2020 European Council meeting, the Council did decide to evaluate whether the EU should apply sanctions at the December 2020 European Council depending on what transpires between Turkey and Greece, as well as Turkey and the Greek Cypriot side, in the interim.

France's strong support for Greece and the Greek Cypriot side is aimed at strengthening Paris's own position in the Mediterranean basin by using the issue that started as a local sovereignty dispute between Turkey and Greece to shift NATO and EU opinion against Turkey. Although France sent its battleships to Eastern Mediterranean, including its nuclear aircraft carrier, French President Emmanuel Macron and French Defence Minister Florence Parly blame Turkey

for stoking tensions in Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, France has been closely coordinating its Eastern Mediterranean policy with the UAE,<sup>10</sup> as exemplified by the August 2020 trilateral air force exercises conducted by Paris and Abu Dhabi with Athens.<sup>11</sup> France, which has experienced difficulty in finding EU support for its interventions in the greater Middle East, had already established close coordination with the UAE in Libya. In May 2020, France and the United Arab Emirates conducted a joint foreign ministers' summit also attended by Egypt, Greece, and SCGA, which issued a final statement declaring the Turkey's actions in Eastern Mediterranean as "illegal" and "urged Turkey to fully respect the sovereign rights of all States in their maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean."<sup>12</sup>

France's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean to the point of sending its naval forces far from its territorial waters is viewed by Ankara as motivated by the desire to fill the power vacuum created by decreasing American interest in the Middle East and Mediterranean basin as the U.S. shifts its focus to threats by People's Republic of China. France's military involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean parallels its efforts to establish European military structures such as EUFOR or the PESCO.<sup>13</sup> The contradictions between the declarations and deeds of France's Macron, who is one of leading voices for EU sanctions against Turkey, is also striking. Concurrent with his calls for dialogue, Macron increases France's military presence in the region. France's aggressive stance only serves to escalate the regional tensions rather than lower them.

Germany, the European Union's leading member, has been much more conciliatory toward Turkey. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who needs the support of Turkey in the refugee problem, has personally intervened to lower tensions. Reflecting the German Chancellor's desire to maintain the EU's relations with Turkey, Merkel told a video conference of EU leaders: "We told Greece and Cyprus [*Sic*] we are in solidarity with them," and "the EU countries are bound to support Greece, we do not want the tension to escalate further in the Mediterranean."<sup>14</sup> Although Germany pursues a more moderate policy in comparison to France, the EU is still requiring Turkey desist from its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. In effect, the EU has joined the alignment against Turkey composed of the U.S., Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia – leaving Turkey isolated in the region.

### **The US and Israel as factors in the changing balances and alignments in the region**

Until the Israel's 2008-2009 *Operation Cast Lead* in the Gaza Strip, the 2009 Davos crisis, and the following year's Israeli assault on the *Mavi Marmara*, Turkey enjoyed both economic and security relations with Israel while the Middle East policies of Greece and the SCGA were tilted more toward the Arab states. However, the discovery of Israeli and Cypriot offshore natural gas reserves concurrent with the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations changed the strategic balances in the region, initiating the formation of new regional alignments.

Greece exploited the opportunity that emerged from the rift in Turkish-Israeli relations to initiate a rapprochement with Israel that within five years produced a strong security partnership between the two Eastern Mediterranean states. After overtures from Athens, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu visited Greece on 16 August 2010, becoming the first acting Israeli prime minister to conduct a state visit to Greece. Following Athens' lead, the SCGA also started to establish ties with Israel during this period. Starting with energy and trade, the three

countries have developed a robust trilateral partnership that involves a strategic level of security cooperation.

Additionally, the August 2020 normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE occurred during the maritime standoff between Turkey and Greece, which saw the UAE send F-16 fighter jets to the Eastern Mediterranean in support of Greece. Deepening overt cooperation between Israel and the UAE in various strategic realms will have consequences for the entire strategic equilibrium in the Middle East with significant spill-over effects for Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics.

The U.S., which sees diminishing opportunities for strategic cooperation with Turkey on account of the Ankara's acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 air defence system, has deepened its support for the trilateral cooperation between Greece, the SCGA, and Israel. The U.S. repositioning in the Eastern Mediterranean began with the new era in U.S.-Greek relations starting under the Syriza-led government in 2015 and accelerating with an upgrade in the U.S.-Greek security partnership in 2019. The Greek government permitted the U.S. to establish new bases in the country and new steps were taken to increase Israel's security cooperation with Greece and the SCGA. While the U.S. used to try to be even-handed in dealing with its two NATO allies Greece and Turkey, Washington's recent tilt toward Greece extended also to the SCGA with the partial lifting of the U.S. arms embargo. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo officially referred to the SCGA as "our key ally in the Eastern Mediterranean," indicating quite clearly the shift in the United States' attitude toward Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup>

Natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean since 2011 have intensified geopolitical competition in the region, prompting regional actors to develop several cross-cutting security alignments that have increased the volatility of the region. Russia's strong military presence in Syria with its Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval base enables Moscow to deploy significant levels of hard power throughout the Eastern Mediterranean basin. With the U.S. 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet is based nearby the region in Naples, Italy, Washington has increased over the past two years the number of military assets it has stationed in Greece – the most recent of which has been the 1 October 2020 stationing of the U.S. Navy's expeditionary sea base *USS Hershel "Woody" Williams* in Greece at Crete's Souda Bay.

Both in terms of soft power and hard power, an array of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean – global as well as regional actors – are operating in a manner that constrains Turkey's ability to pursue its national interests and secure access to the region's energy resources.

### **What should Turkey do?**

The current Turkey-Greece is not very different in terms of both content and form from the crises that have arisen intermittently since mid-1970s. The single most significant difference in the current crisis is the pro-Greek stands of the major regional actors – Israel and Egypt.<sup>16</sup> The current crisis between Turkey and Greece has increased Turkey's "precious loneliness" in the Eastern Mediterranean to an unprecedented level. Despite NATO's avowed neutrality, the leading partner of the alliance, the United States, has taken a pro-Greece, as well as pro-SCGA, stance. Washington sent clear signal by creating a new U.S. naval and air force base in Greece's Alexandroupoli port (formerly the Ottoman city of Dedeğaç) near the Turkish border. The three leading members of the European Union – Germany, France, and Italy – have announce

their support of Greece and SCGA, with France and Italy even conducting quadrilateral naval exercises with Greece and the SCGA during the crisis. U.S. and EU support for Greece enables Athens to ignore Turkey's maritime rights and international agreements. Thus, Greece's willingness to discuss the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean are unlikely to have any constructive results. Greece's objective is to portray itself as reasonable and open to negotiations and cast Turkey as the actor who is intransigent and the source of the problem.

While Turkey should persist to press for its legitimate rights, Ankara's cause would be best served by a more agile diplomacy toward Turkey's other neighbours in the region. Viewing the Eastern Mediterranean as a regional system, Turkey can strengthen its hand by signing EEZ agreements with Syria, Lebanon, and most importantly Egypt and Israel. Turkey has no direct maritime conflict with Egypt. For its part, Cairo was careful not to include Kastellorizo/Meis in its maritime agreement with Athens as a nod to Turkish interests. Similarly, Ankara can work toward the full rehabilitation of its relations with Israel. Turkey's robust trade relationship with Israel is a much greater foundation upon which to build a deeper relationship than what the UAE and Israel or Bahrain and Israel shared before their recent normalization agreements.<sup>17</sup>

Greece and the SCGA have skilfully engaged in a wide-ranging diplomacy with local actors and global powers to develop sympathy for their positions in the Eastern Mediterranean that ultimately seek to leave Turkey with an extremely limited zone of maritime sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> However, such an outcome is inimical to Turkey's vital economic and security interests. Turkey has a strategic imperative to reverse its international isolation.

In hindsight, it is clear that Ankara's policies in the first years following the 2011 Arab Spring undermined Turkey's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean by propelling Egypt and Israel toward an anti-Turkey alignment. If Turkey had refrained from interference in Egyptian domestic affairs, Cairo would probably not have made a choice between Greece and Turkey. It might have even looked favourably upon Turkey's role in the marketing of Eastern Mediterranean energy given that Turkey is the largest regional market for natural gas. Turkey needs to engage in a new and more effective diplomacy to improve its relations with these key regional actors with whom Turkey has no maritime dispute.

While neither the U.S. nor the EU wants tension between two NATO members to escalate into an open clash, both can tolerate a "controlled tension" that isolates Turkey and keeps it under pressure to relent from pressing its claims. Turkey should end its isolation among the littoral states of the Eastern Mediterranean and appoint ambassadors again to Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Damascus. Through robust state-to-state regional diplomacy, Ankara can end its isolation and also ensure that it does not leave a diplomatic vacuum that Greece and the SCGA can fill.

Turkey does possess tools of coercive force it can deploy to prevent the usurpation of its rights when all diplomatic channels are blocked. However, military action should not be Turkey's first approach to protecting its interests in the international arena. Ankara should read the geopolitical landscape with sober pragmatism that serves Turkey's interest and act to advance through interests through skilful diplomatic outreach that builds regional partnerships. Diplomacy is the *sine qua non* of international politics. The Eastern Mediterranean crisis shows that the abandonment of this basic foreign policy tool will dangerously and unnecessarily increase Turkey's difficulty in pursuing its national interests.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the report published by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) on 08 April 2010, one of the largest deposits of natural gas in the world is located in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, in the region between the island of Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, with an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet (3.5 trillion cubic metres) natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of petroleum in that region. "Natural GAs Potential Assessed in Eastern Mediterranean", 4 August 2010, [http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=2435#.Vbjhd\\_ntmkp](http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=2435#.Vbjhd_ntmkp),

<sup>2</sup> Gözde Kılıç Yaşın, "Türk Dış Politikasında Doğu Akdeniz Stratejisi", in Ed. Ümit Özdağ & Yelda Ongun, Türk Dış Politikasında Hasar Tespiti, Destek Yayınları, İstanbul, 2020, pp.315-369.

<sup>3</sup> Resmi Gazete, 10.10.2012, no:28437

<sup>4</sup> "Türkiye'den BM'ye Doğu Akdeniz Mektubu", Ulusal Kanal, 30 Kasım 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Michaël Tanchum, "How did the Eastern Mediterranean become the eye of a geopolitical storm?", Foreign Policy, 18 August 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/18/eastern-mediterranean-greece-turkey-warship-geopolitical-showdown/>

<sup>6</sup> In the Mediterranean, the Greek, Greek Cypriot and Turkish theses are as follows: Athens argues that most of the Aegean Sea belongs to Greece in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) because according to this convention each island has its own territorial waters, continental shelf, and exclusive economic zone (EEZ). On the other hand, Turkey which did not sign UNCLOS responds by asserting the convention is inapplicable to the Aegean Sea because the Aegean is made up of many adjacent islands, islets, and rocks. Moreover, Turkey claims that by arguing a solution that would make one side win and the other side lose, Greece is acting against the principle of equity, and that Greece cannot assert any claims to a continental shelf and EEZ for the islands that are to the East of the middle point. Each island can have continental shelf within only up to 6 miles of island's territorial waters and it is not possible that this can be expanded to 12 miles. Again, Ankara argues that the Greek air space of 10 miles is against international law as a country's air space cannot exceed its territorial waters – with the Greek territorial waters understood as limited at 6 miles. Another important point is that the East Aegean islands were granted to Greece with the condition that they would be free of armament.

Hasan Ünal, a.g.m., Eylül 2020, p.51. "Türk-Yunan çekişmesi bütün Akdeniz'e yayılıyor", ScienceUp Bilim- Kültür-Düşünce Dergisi, September 2020, pp.50-53. For the legal part of the dispute; see. bkz. Sertaç Hami Başeren, Doğu Akdeniz'de Hukuk ve Siyaset, Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1st. impression, Ankara, 2013; Sertaç Hami Başeren, Doğu Akdeniz Deniz Yetki Alanları Uyuşmazlığı, Pegasus Yayıncılık, 1st impression, İstanbul, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Hasan Ünal, a.g.m., September 2020, p.51.

<sup>8</sup> "Yunan askeri Meis'ten sonra Karaada'ya çıktı", Sputnik, 10.09.2020.

<sup>9</sup> N.A., "Ajaccio declaration after the 7th Summit of the Southern EU countries (MED7)", The French Republic Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 10 September 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/ajaccio-declaration-after-the-7th-summit-of-the-southern-eu-countries-med7-10>

<sup>10</sup> Eyüp Ersoy, "Yeni bir stratejik ortaklık mı?", Karar, 11 September 2020., <https://www.karar.com/yeni-bir-stratejik-ortaklik-mi-1584799>

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Lucinda Smith, "UAE joins Greek drills amid tension in the Med", The Times, August 25 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tensions-spiral-over-energy-reserves-in-eastern-mediterranean-lnkj7z7wt>; Nicholas Paphitis, "Greek officials say UAE warplanes to arrive for joint drills", The Washington Post, August 21, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/greek-officials-say-uae-warplanes-to-arrive-for-joint-drills/2020/08/21/ac44eddc-e3ba-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/greek-officials-say-uae-warplanes-to-arrive-for-joint-drills/2020/08/21/ac44eddc-e3ba-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html)

<sup>12</sup> N.A. "Meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, France, Cyprus, Greece and United Arab Emirates" Final Declaration", The French Republic Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 11 May 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/egypt/news/article/meeting-between-the-foreign-ministers-of-egypt-france-cyprus-greece-and-the>

<sup>13</sup> Gülsüm İncekaya, "Uzmanlara göre Macron Ankara üzerinden bir başarı hikayesi çıkarmaya çalışıyor", Anadolu Ajansı, 2 September 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/uzmanlara-gore-macron-ankara-uzerinden-bir-basari-hikayesi-cikarmaya-calisiyor/1960995>

<sup>14</sup> N.A. "Merkel'den Doğu Akdeniz'de Yunanistan'a destek", Haberglobal, 28 August 2020, <https://haberglobal.com.tr/dunya/merkeldenden-dogu-akdenizde-yunanistana-destek-65929>

<sup>15</sup> "US announces partial lifting of arms embargo on Cyprus", Kathimerini, 1 September 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/256454/article/ekathimerini/news/us-announces-partial-lifting-of-arms-embargo-on-cyprus>; Murat Yetkin, "Turkey warns US over lifting embargo on Greek Cyprus", Yetkin Report, September 2, 2020, <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2020/09/02/turkey-warns-us-over-lifting-embargo-on-greek-cyprus/>

<sup>16</sup> See Prof. Dr. Hasan Ünal's statement in the Ceyda Karan ile Eksen TV program, 17.08.2020.

<sup>17</sup> Robbie Gramer, Colum Lynch, and Jack Detsch "Trump Extends Arab Push to Normalize Ties with Israel", Foreign Policy, 11 September 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/11/trump-extends-arab-push-normalize-ties-with-israel-sudan/>

<sup>18</sup> Ahmet Zeki Bulunç, "Kıbrıs Rum-Yunan İkilisinin petrol maskesi altında Doğu Akdeniz'de egemenlik yayılması", Anıtkabir Dergisi, Sayı:27, August 2007, pp.13-17

## Escalating Complexity in Libya's Ongoing Conflict

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In 2019, the conflict in Libya passed a significant milestone for the worst. Foreign intervention in the conflict became overt in nature and regional powers became more aggressive and assertive in their policy towards Libya. Turkey signed a security cooperation agreement with Tripoli under which it sent thousands of mercenaries to Libya and poured in millions of tons of arms, seeking to build up its military footprint by establishing an airbase and a navy base on Libya's north-western coast. Russia has increased its involvement through Damascus and Abu Dhabi by pouring in thousands of mercenaries and deploying advanced weapons systems and fighter jets to Sirte and al-Jufrah. Egypt's president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi vowed to intervene militarily in Libya if Turkish backed forces tried to cross the Sirt-Jufrah line.

Libya finds itself entangled in a number of regional crises. The regional standoff between Turkey and Qatar on one side, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt on the other, as well as, the direct link to the Eastern Mediterranean crisis through the establishment of the Exclusive Economic Zone between Turkey and Libya. This increased linkage complicates the conflict in Libya and makes it hard to envision a solely Libyan solution to the conflict in Libya. A solution to the Libyan crisis will entail a minimum threshold of alignment between the interests of key regional and international players directly involved and invested in the Libyan conflict.

### Background

The signing of two memoranda of understanding (MoU) on maritime borders and security and military cooperation between Turkey and the Tripoli based Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayeze al-Sarraj in November 2019 marked a turning point in the Turkish intervention in the Libyan arena and took foreign intervention in the Libyan conflict to a whole new level by deploying hundreds of Turkish troops, thousands of Syrian mercenaries and armed drones and advanced air defence systems across western Libya. Prior to this point, foreign actors involved in Libya did so covertly and had to constantly deny their involvement in the conflict. At this point, Turkey became overtly involved in conflict under what Ankara insists is an acceptable legal framework for such direct military intervention as set out in the terms of the two MoUs signed with the GNA.

When the leader of the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) Khalifa Haftar launched his military offensive against the GNA in a bid to capture the capital Tripoli in April 2019, the GNA was abandoned by the international community and its allies in Europe. Haftar launched his military campaign ten days before a national conference planned by the United Nations, demonstrating that Haftar had little or no regard for the UN-led political process in Libya. More importantly, Haftar launched his offensive exactly when UN Secretary-General António Guterres was in Tripoli seeking to unite the country by inaugurating a reconciliation process that would reach a consensus on a constitution and enable democratic elections to take place.

Haftar besieged and bombarded the GNA's forces in Tripoli for more than seven months. The support provided by the UAE and Russia to the LNA started to yield results by September 2019

when Wagner Group-linked mercenaries were deployed to the frontlines in Tripoli. Turkey and Qatar were the only two countries providing the GNA with support against the LNA's offensive at that point. Opportunistically, Ankara sought to exploit the GNA's vulnerability to further its own interests in the eastern Mediterranean, and hence with the help of its Islamist and hardline revolutionary allies in Tripoli and Misrata successfully signed the maritime borders delimitation and security cooperation agreements with the GNA despite initial reservations and hesitation within certain quarters in the GNA coalition – particularly the current represented by al-Sarraj who resisted the signing of the MoUs with Turkey for months until it became apparent that the international community was not going to act to put an end to the Haftar's offensive to capture Tripoli. For example, Islamist figures such as the President of the State Council, Khalid al-Mashri played an instrumental role in realizing the two MoUs with Turkey.<sup>1</sup> This development would usher in a new level of complexity to the Libyan conflict as it directly links Libya to the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup>

### **Libya's Regional Dimension: An uneasy Russian-Turkish symbiosis in a crowded field**

Libya is slowly but steadily turning into a geopolitical space under the influence of various foreign actors. Turkey and to a lesser extent Italy and Algeria share influence over western Libya, while Russia, Egypt and the UAE, and to lesser extent France, share influence in central and eastern Libya. France is looking to re-establish links with factions and leaders in western Libya but to no avail. However, France's historical and natural sphere of influence is the southern region of Fezzan. It is an area of potential escalation between Turkey and France given the current trend of proactive rhetoric and moves by both countries. For example, France continues to build up its military presence in the Mediterranean and strengthens its presence in Niger and Chad, while Turkey is working hard to rehabilitate the al-Witayah airbase to help project its air force power over western Libya and towards the southern region of Fezzan as well as seeking to build its relationships with Sub-Saharan African countries.

Russia on the other hand managed to have a foothold in eastern and central Libya through the deployment of private military contractors (PMCs) reportedly paid for by Libya's eastern authorities and the UAE.<sup>3</sup> However, Russia and Turkey exhibit an interesting dynamic in the Libyan conflict. Although they support opposite sides of the conflict, they have shown great skill at managing their current rivalry against the backdrop of their strategic partnership in the wider region enabling them disagree on some key issues such as the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Crimea, as well as, the recently ignited Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but strike deals in other areas such as defence, energy and trade. Furthermore, Russia and Turkey, with their actions, have enabled each other in Libya. The deployment of Russian PMCs to the frontlines in September 2019 enabled Turkey to sign the two MoUs with the vulnerable GNA in Tripoli with no objection from the United States. In reality, officials and diplomats from the United States justified the overt Turkish intervention in Libya with the presence of the Russian PMCs suggesting a U.S. greenlight for Turkey's intervention in Libya to counter Russia's increased involvement on the ground. Furthermore, the military action of Turkey against the LNA in first quarter of 2020 enabled Russia to increase its military footprint in eastern and central Libya taking advantage of a weakened and vulnerable LNA. As a consequence, Russia was able to deploy more advanced military assets including advanced air-defence systems and fighter jets.<sup>4</sup>

As Moscow seeks to strengthen its engagement with the eastern Libya bloc and Ankara builds its military footprint and influence in Tripoli, Erdoğan and Putin could repeat their January 2020 attempt to hijack international diplomacy over Libya when they attempted to broker a ceasefire agreement between Libya's warring factions, but Haftar left Moscow without signing. Turkey and Russia stand to lose a great deal of the influence they have gained in Libya over the last year if the current round of political dialogue efforts under the auspices of the United Nations results in a new unity government. Removing foreign mercenaries and reviewing security and military cooperation agreements will be one of the top priority for such a unity government. For their part, Turkey and Russia would prefer an Astana-like process that would see Turkey and Russia take the diplomatic lead over Libya's transition and future power sharing arrangements. Such an arrangement would presumably be the safest way to safeguard Turkish and Russian interests and influence in Libya that otherwise could be threatened and weakened with a process under the auspices of the United Nations. Importantly, unlike Syria, Libya has a number of other foreign actors with vested interests. An Astana-like process must have the buy-in from countries like Egypt and Algeria to succeed. Furthermore, Moscow risks alienating Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Cairo if they go ahead with the process alongside Ankara.

For its part, Ankara risks exacerbating its already fraught relationship with Washington. However since November 2019, Ankara and Moscow have shown a willingness to cooperate in Libya by attempting to broker a joint ceasefire agreement in January 2020, and forming a joint working committee on Libya to coordinate efforts for a ceasefire and political settlement in the country. Moreover in September 2020, both countries agreed on the terms for the demilitarization of the Sirte-Jufrah frontline. Ankara tacitly supported Moscow's brokered deal between Khalifa Haftar and the GNA's deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Mitig to restart oil production in Libya and reopen the oil terminals that had been shut for more than eight months. Russia's policy in Libya appears to revolve around keeping the conflict ongoing until the right conditions for a greater Russian footprint in Libya are realized. Russia's ambitions in Libya range from economic interests to ambitions for a permanent military presence and rebuking of the West for overthrowing the Qaddafi regime in 2011 by helping Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam gain power in Libya.

The eastern Libya theatre is already crowded with other foreign actors including Egypt, the UAE, and France. As Moscow deepens its engagement with eastern Libya, it will have to contend with this crowded field and capitalize on overlapping interests to mitigate competition with those players. While Cairo would be nervous about growing Russian influence in eastern Libya and the potential for a long term Russian military presence on their western borders, the Emirates seem to have a greater alignment with Russia and are helping facilitate some of Russia's involvement in Libya by bankrolling some of the Wagner PMC's activities.<sup>5</sup> Greater Russian-Emirati<sup>6</sup> cooperation is evident in other theatres including Syria and Yemen. Both Moscow and Abu Dhabi have helped facilitate the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Assad regime and the eastern authorities in Libya resulting in growing air traffic between Damascus and Benghazi. France, on the other hand, is in a precarious position given its NATO membership and its strategic relationship with the United States.

The Libyan conflict has now become entangled in the Eastern Mediterranean standoff between Turkey and Greece and the wider European Union (EU) zone. The EU's relationship with Ankara and how to handle the Eastern Mediterranean issue has exacerbated EU divisions over Libya. While France is taking a hardliner position against Turkey's actions in the Eastern

Mediterranean, Italy and Malta have been reaching out to Ankara and Tripoli on issues related to migration and energy. Germany is playing a mediating role trying to ease tensions between Turkey and its European allies. On 28 May 2020, Malta signed an agreement with Libya to curb irregular migration to Europe through the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> The agreement involves the establishment of two coordination centres, one in Valletta and one in Tripoli. Also, in May, Malta gave notice to the EU that it would not commit any assets to the EU's naval Operation Irini to enforce the UN mandated arms embargo. Malta vowed to veto<sup>8</sup> its planned extension over concerns that the operation would encourage illegal migration crossings. The Maltese championed claims by Ankara and Tripoli that the operation was biased in favour of Khalifa Haftar and his allies given that the naval operation does not interdict the deliveries of weapons by land and air. Furthermore, on 3 September 2020, a geopolitical symbiosis between Italy and Turkey set in motion a Turkey-Italy-Tunisia transportation corridor that promises to reconfigure the patterns of trade between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, slicing across the centre of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>9</sup> However, the risk of a standoff between Italy and Turkey in western Libya is high given Turkey's attempts to dominate the energy and reconstruction contracts being offered by the GNA in Tripoli. Italy is treading a careful line vis-à-vis Turkey in western Libya. Italy's new approach in Libya aims to rebuild strong relations with factions within the GNA in an attempt to limit Ankara's influence in the country and to avoid marginalisation in western Libya. Italy also wants to strengthen its relations with Tripoli to ensure control over the number of migrants and refugees crossing to Italy from western Libya. Energy and migration in western Libya are two files that could be exploited by Ankara against EU countries in an attempt to extract favours elsewhere, primarily in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### **Escalation or de-escalation?**

Despite the efforts of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to relaunch the political process in Libya, various factors and indicators point to further escalation of the conflict in Libya. The atomization of Libya's various competing camps threatens any potential deal going forward. For example, when the House of Representative speaker Agilah Saleh and the President of the Presidency Council Fayez al-Sarraj declared a ceasefire across Libya on 21 August 2020, the LNA's spokesperson undermined the two statements by rejecting the al-Sarraj ceasefire announcement, and at the same time, GNA's military commander Salah Badi launched a security operation targeting what he claimed were LNA sleeper cells in western towns. These two examples highlight the challenge of the authority of political leaders of the various camps in Libya to make binding agreements. There is a clear disconnect between the formal and real authority in Libya.

Additionally, Foreign intervention in Libya has reached unprecedented levels and has become more pronounced and overt in nature. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) remains divided and highly polarized, which in turn weakens the role of UNSMIL as a mediator. As Salame himself rued during an interview with the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in June 2020, at the time of the LNA's advance on Tripoli, "most" Security Council member states were hindering UNSMIL's efforts to reach a ceasefire.<sup>10</sup> Salame repeatedly throughout his tenure as UN envoy to Libya had complained that a divided UNSC made his job in Libya impossible. Even several months after Salame's departure, this remains the case.

The United State is potentially the only country that can play a decisive role in resolving the conflict in Libya. However, under the Obama and Trump administrations, the U.S. was

disengaged from Libya and did not want to take that leading role. Under Trump, the U.S. policy towards Libya has been characterized by mixed messages and shifting positions that fuelled the conflict further. Libya is not a priority for U.S. policy makers, and this is unlikely to change no matter who occupies the White House in January 2021.

In turn, Germany emerged as a potential neutral geopolitical power in the Libyan conflict and a mediator in the Eastern Mediterranean standoff Turkey and Greece. However, in the face of aggressive unilaterally-driven powers such as Turkey and Russia, Germany champions a multilateral approach. This puts Germany at a disadvantage given that multilateralism is slow and largely ineffective in the face of aggressive unilateralism. Unless Germany succeeds in rallying European Union member states around a unified Libya policy, it is hard to imagine that Germany's efforts in Libya can bear any fruit as France, Italy and Malta seek to secure their own interests at the expense of a unified and comprehensive EU policy towards Libya.

### **Increased linkages to the eastern Mediterranean complicates the crisis in Libya**

With every passing day since the signing of the two MoUs between Turkey and the GNA on 27 November 2019, Libya is increasingly dragged into the Eastern Mediterranean crisis. The fault lines of the conflict in Libya are somewhat reflected in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis with Turkey on one side and France, UAE, Egypt on the other. However, Turkey and Russia's interests in the eastern Mediterranean appear to temporarily overlap as Turkey stokes tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean risking to disrupt exploration and development of the natural gas resources that would lessen Europe's dependence on Russian supplied gas. The evident link between the crisis in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean increases the potential for cooperation between Turkey and Russia in Libya despite the fact that they back opposite sides in the conflict.

The UAE is increasing its activities in the Eastern Mediterranean in support of Greece and Cyprus against Turkey to the point that the UAE could now be considered an Eastern Mediterranean player. On May 31, Egypt announced an international alliance that includes Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates, and France to confront Turkish moves in Libya and the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> Since January 2020, Greece has increased its diplomatic contacts with Libya's eastern authorities with the intention of disrupting Turkey's claims in the Eastern Mediterranean based on the maritime MoU signed with the GNA in Tripoli.

### **Conclusion**

The solution to the conflict in Libya will have to address the increase in complexity due to the growing linkage to other regional crises and the ongoing stand off between regional blocs. This presents an mountainous challenge to ongoing inter-Libyan dialogue under the auspices of the UN as foreign players may have an incentive to interfere with peace talks in order to consolidate their gains -- this particularly true in the case of Turkey and Russia. Both countries would prefer a diplomatic process dominated by them as the only means to secure their interests in Libya.

Nevertheless, Turkey could be amenable to change its course in Libya if it sees an opportunity to address the driving factors for its intervention through political and diplomatic efforts. These include securing allies in the next unity government, receiving guarantees regarding its

exclusive economic zone with Libya, reactivating billions of dollars in contracts, and establishing a direct dialogue channel with Egypt. Likewise, better engagement from Europe in relation to Turkey's concerns in the Eastern Mediterranean may also result in Ankara changing its course in Libya.

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in Tunis made important progress on the political roadmap for the upcoming transitional period and agreed on 24 December 2021 as a date for the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. However, participants are yet to agree other contentious issues such as the functions of the new presidency council and the various government ministries, as well as the election and selection criteria for these parts of the executive branch. There is also no agreement on concrete plans for the constitutional track. Foreign interference still looms large over the LPDF and its outcomes. The visit of the Turkish President to Tripoli in the second half of November is a clear sign that the regional players want their interests in Libya safeguarded and protected through this LPDF. Otherwise, escalation remains real prospect on the ground.

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<sup>2</sup> Multiple Authors, Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) May 2020. [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern\\_med](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern_med)

<sup>3</sup> Paul Stronski, "Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) 2 June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniability-russia-s-private-military-companies-pub-81954>

<sup>4</sup> N.A., "Russia Deploys Military Fighter Aircraft to Libya, Africom Officials Say", United States Department of Defense, 26 May 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2197202/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-libya/>

<sup>5</sup> Paul Stronski. "Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies".

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Ramani. The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. UAE and Russia Find Common Ground on Syria", Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), 11 March 2019, <https://agsiw.org/uae-and-russia-find-common-ground-on-syria/>

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<sup>9</sup> Michaël Tanchum, "Italy and Turkey's Europe-to-Africa Commercial Corridor: Rome and Ankara's Geopolitical Symbiosis Is Creating a New Mediterranean Strategic Paradigm", AIES Fokus 10/2020, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES) 25 August 2020, <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2020/fokus-20-10.php>

<sup>10</sup> Ghassan Salamé, "Ghassan Salamé On The Failures Of The International Community To Stop Wars", Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 20 June 2020, <https://www.hdcentre.org/podcasts/ghassan-salam-on-the-failures-of-the-international-community-to-stop-wars/>

<sup>11</sup> Suzan Fraser, "Turkey accuses five nations of forming 'alliance of evil'", Associated Press, 12 May 2020, <https://apnews.com/9c6657583d50e2cb842bcf2d708d9f0e>

# Egypt's Energy Ambitions and its Eastern Mediterranean Policy

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Among the large array of countries that have become embroiled in the disputes over maritime rights and natural gas prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt occupies a unique position, in that it is the only one of the parties to have a well-developed gas production infrastructure, a substantial domestic market, and liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminals. Egypt's economic priority in this context is to manage its natural gas resources in the most effective way to serve its domestic energy needs. It also has an interest in garnering revenue from exporting any surplus gas that it can produce, as well as from serving as a channel for other regional players, in particular Israel and Cyprus, to export their surplus gas. The development of such an export hub could eventually enable Egypt to play a role as a swing producer, responding to and influencing the global market.

There are also powerful political undercurrents affecting Eastern Mediterranean gas. The most dangerous of these is the moves by Turkey to assert its claims over the region's waters and resources. These claims do not pose any immediate direct threat to Egypt's natural gas resources. However, they come in the context of a simmering ideological conflict between the ruling groups in Turkey and Egypt that has been laid onto the armed conflict in Libya, in which Egypt and Turkey are actively supporting rival sides. Egypt has enlisted a wide range of allies and partners in order to reinforce its position vis-à-vis Turkey. These have included Greece, with which Egypt signed an exclusive economic zone agreement in August 2020 that impinges on a zone declared between Turkey and the Tripoli-based Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). Egypt has also recently awarded a series of gas exploration blocks in its western Mediterranean waters, adjacent to an area claimed by Turkey, to US majors ExxonMobil and Chevron, as well as to France's Total. This has created a line of defence in the face of any potential move by Turkey to extend its writ over this area.

## **Egypt is the gate-keeper for marketing Eastern Mediterranean gas**

Egypt's experience as a mid-tier natural gas producer since the late 1980s (it is now the 13th-largest producer in the world, just behind Indonesia and Malaysia<sup>1</sup>) should provide its energy strategists and its policymakers with the perspective to assess the issues related to geological prospects and market potential in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the current global environment of abundant gas supply, weak demand, low prices and the gathering momentum for decarbonisation, the chances of any other country in the eastern Mediterranean being able to develop a new integrated natural gas province without some form of connection to Egypt are slim. This has already become clear in the cases of Israel and Cyprus. Egypt also has first-hand experience of the pitfalls of investment in LNG and pipeline exports. Its own LNG plants have so far operated at well below capacity for most of the time since they came on stream in the mid-2000s, and the pipelines built to Israel and Jordan have been commercial disasters. There is now an opportunity for LNG exports from Egypt to recover over the coming decade, but there is little chance that Egypt would commit any resources to a trans-Mediterranean pipeline, which would be hugely expensive, politically controversial, and aimed at a market that is in decline and which has a wide range of cheaper and more reliable supply options. These

options include a planned surge in LNG supply from Qatar, Turkey's main regional ally, from the mid-2020s.

### **How Egypt plans to make the most of its natural gas**

The commercial development of natural gas in Egypt dates back to the 1960s, when Italy's Eni discovered the Abu Madi field in the Delta. Investment picked up strongly after the model petroleum agreement was amended in 1986 to provide the same terms for natural gas as for crude oil, with the addition of take-or-pay clauses covering the sale of the operating partner's share to the Egyptian state. With Eni, BP, Shell, and BG Group (subsequently acquired by Shell) to the fore, a string of new gas fields was discovered and developed off the Delta coast, mainly in the eastern and central sections. Production started to climb rapidly from the late 1990s, and the then petroleum minister, Sameh Fahmy (appointed in 1999), launched an ambitious export strategy. This culminated in the start-up of the Iduku and Damietta LNG plants (operated, respectively, by BG and Spain's Union Fenosa) in 2004-05. A pipeline to Jordan and onwards to Syria and Lebanon was inaugurated in 2003, and line to Israel delivered its first gas in 2009.

However, by the time the Israel pipeline started operations, deep flaws in Egypt's gas export strategy were starting to become apparent. Extensive energy subsidies and high rates of economic growth had combined to push up Egypt's domestic gas consumption, while the cap on the price of gas sold by the operators rendered investment in newly discovered offshore fields uneconomic. Moreover, huge payments arrears had built up along the energy supply chain as a result of subsidies. The backlog in payments owed to foreign gas field operators had reached about \$6 billion in 2011, when Egypt's economic problems were aggravated by the effects of the uprising against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Gas exports ceased in 2012, partly as a result of bomb attacks on the pipeline system in Sinai, but mainly because of the erosion of Egypt's gas surplus. Power stations were switched to fuel oil from gas, and towards the end of 2014 Egypt started to import LNG.

A comprehensive reset of Egypt's energy policy started from late 2013. The new petroleum minister, Sherif Ismail, took steps to improve relations with the foreign operators, notably through allowing for higher prices to be charged for gas from new fields and through making a commitment to pay off the arrears. This approach was vindicated most dramatically by the discovery and rapid development of the Zohr field. The Shorouk block in which Eni found the field in mid-2015 is in an area along the maritime border with Cyprus. It was previously part of a large block that had been held by Shell in the early 2000s. Shell had indicated that its seismic surveys had identified the potential for the area to hold large reserves of gas, but its drilling campaign failed to yield significant results. In the meantime, major discoveries were made in nearby Israeli waters (Leviathan in 2010) and just to the north-west of Shorouk in Cypriot waters (Aphrodite in 2011). Zohr eclipsed both of these discoveries, with reserves of about 850 billion cubic meters (bcm). More importantly, Eni was able to embark on a rapid development programme, bringing the first gas onshore in late 2017, and reaching its long-term plateau production capacity of 3 billion cubic feet/day (equivalent to 30 bcm/year) in early 2020. The speed of Zohr's development was made possible by the existence of substantial sub-sea infrastructure put in place between the field and the shoreline by Eni and BP over the previous two decades, and by the assurance that the company would be able to sell its share of production into the Egyptian market at a reasonable price and with a reasonable expectation of being paid promptly. Thanks to Zohr and the development of other new or delayed projects,

Egypt's total gas production started to increase once more from September 2016, LNG imports had been phased out by the end of 2018, and LNG exports resumed from Idku, albeit at well below capacity.

The primary focus for Egypt's gas strategy is to ensure that the country's domestic energy needs are met. With Zohr now fully on stream and other projects such as BP's West Nile Delta coming into operation, Egypt's current gas production is sufficient to cover domestic demand, while leaving some scope for exports via the Idku LNG terminal and through the pipeline to Jordan. According to BP's *Statistical Review of World Energy*, Egypt produced 64.9 bcm in 2019, 10.9% more than in 2018, and exceeding the previous record of 60.3 bcm in 2009. In the intervening period, production had fallen to a low point of 40 bcm in 2016. As production has increased, Egypt's consumption growth has been moderated by improvements in efficiency in the power sector. Demand actually fell by 1.1% year on year in 2019 to 59.6 bcm, having grown by 9% per year on average in 2016-2018.<sup>2</sup> The electricity ministry has attributed the reduction in consumption to the impact of the start-up of three large combined-cycle power stations built by Siemens, with total capacity of 14.4GW (about one-quarter of Egypt's total installed thermal capacity). These plants operate at much higher levels of efficiency than the older units that they are replacing, and the ministry estimated that they played a major part in yielding fuel cost savings of \$665 million in the 2018/19 (July-June) fiscal year.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the pause in 2019, Egypt's gas demand is likely to grow at a relatively brisk pace through the 2020s. Domestic and industrial use will increase as the gas grid is expanded, and as buildings in developments such as the new administrative capital are fitted with gas appliances. Gas will remain the principal source of fuel for electricity generation, even while solar and wind power increases, and the expansion of the electrified rail network and the increase in desalination capacity and the development of electric vehicles will further boost demand for power. According to the most recent data issued by the Egyptian Electricity Holding Company, in the 2018/19 (July-June) fiscal year Egypt's total installed generating capacity was 58.4 GW, of which about 90% was gas-fired. The peak load during this period was 31.4 GW, which means that the system has a large inbuilt surplus. Power stations accounted for almost two-thirds of Egypt's total natural gas consumption.<sup>4</sup>

Ensuring that there is sufficient natural gas supply over the medium term in order to support the growth in electricity demand is a central plank of Egypt's energy strategy. This will require maintaining the momentum of exploration and development in order to compensate for the depletion of existing fields and to accommodate rising demand. The entry of Chevron and ExxonMobil into the Egyptian upstream is an encouraging sign, while established operators Eni and BP have continued to make fresh discoveries, the most recent being Bashrush, off the eastern Delta, announced by Eni at the start of July 2020.<sup>5</sup> Chevron and Shell are preparing to drill the first exploration wells in the Red Sea, while the Herodotus basin in the western section of Egypt's Mediterranean waters is the target of drilling to be undertaken by Chevron, ExxonMobil and Total. The pace of exploration and development may slow down, however, as a result of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the global gas market and on the Egyptian economy. As part of the effort to make the natural gas sector financially sustainable and attractive for foreign operators, the government has increased domestic prices over the past few years, in particular for industries. However, the government came under pressure during 2019 to match the fall in global gas prices. In early 2020 the price of gas for industry was lowered to US\$4.5/mmBTU from US\$5.5/mmBTU, but this was still well above prices in Europe and on

the Asian spot LNG market. The contract price for foreign operators in return for their share of gas production now ranges up to US\$5.88/mmBTU, but this is based on an oil-related formula, and with the oil market now in a prolonged slump, the actual prices paid for the foreign operators' gas share will be at the bottom end of the scale.

The fall in prices has also raised questions about the profitability of natural gas exports. With Egypt's gas fields producing at full capacity, and assuming the delivery of about 3 bcm/year through the pipeline from Israel, the total surplus supply in Egypt during 2020 and 2021 would be about 10 bcm /year. Exports through the pipeline to Jordan are now running at a rate of 1.5-2 bcm/year, with the remaining gas available for export from the Idku and Damietta terminals. The capacity of Idku's two trains is 7.2m tonnes/year, equivalent to about 10 bcm, while Damietta's single train can deliver 5m tonnes/year, which would require feedstock of about 6.8 bcm. Idku is now back in service, although it is still operating below capacity, partly because of the weakness of the global LNG market. A plan to restart the Damietta terminal was announced in early 2020, but has been suspended owing to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The plan entails Eni increasing its stake in the venture by taking over equity of the original Spanish developers. It would also entail the settlement of claims from the Spanish stakeholders arising from the plant's closure since 2012. Eni would be responsible for the procurement of the gas for the plant, and would have the rights to 50% of the LNG exported from it. This provides an additional marketing opportunity for Zohr, as well as for a potential LNG export outlet for Israeli gas.

## Hub hopes

The start of deliveries of Israeli gas to Egypt in 2020 through the pipeline that was originally built to transport gas in the other direction marks a small step towards the realisation of Egypt's aspiration to become a regional natural gas hub. The deliveries, from the Leviathan field, will total about 2. bcm /year on average in 2020-21, and will rise to an annual level of 4.7 bcm in the second half of 2022, with the addition of supplies from Tamar, according to Delek Drilling, the principal Israeli partner in these fields.<sup>6</sup> The pipeline deal has included means to settle claims arising from the original project. The parties on the Egyptian side have been identified by a prominent investigative journalist as being connected to the country's intelligence services.<sup>7</sup> The corporate structure is complex, and few details about the commercial terms, such as the price formulas being used, have been released. The critical challenge facing the Israeli gas fields is to secure profitable markets, given the limited consumption capacity of Israel itself. Exporting to the global market via Egypt's LNG terminals is an attractive option. The entry of Chevron, a major with experience of developing some of the world's largest LNG operations in Australia, could provide fresh momentum for the Israeli fields. Chevron has submitted a bid to take over Noble Energy, an independent US firm that is the operating partner in both the Leviathan and Tamar projects. Assuming this deal comes to fruition, there could be opportunities for Chevron to invest in expanding Egypt's LNG export capacity, in particular if its own exploration drive in Egypt proves to be successful.

For the time being, however, the gas piped from Israel will make up only about 3% of total Egyptian supply. This could increase to become a more substantial contribution by the mid-2020s, and the addition of gas from fields discovered in Cyprus—but yet to be developed—could enable Egypt to achieve the status of a regional hub later in the decade. In 2019 Egypt exported 4.5 bcm of LNG. Volumes are likely to be slightly lower in 2020, but it is feasible to

envisage Egypt's exports climbing to 15 bcm by the middle of the decade, provided that domestic production does not suffer a decline, and with the addition of increased supply from Israel and, possibly, Cyprus. That could be the spur for the addition of new trains at Idku and Damietta, and even the construction new terminals to export gas from the western Mediterranean coast and the Red Sea if new discoveries are made in these areas. Nevertheless, the most optimistic scenario for available surplus supply in Egypt from the east Mediterranean producers in the mid- to late-2020s (including Cyprus and Gaza) would be in the region of 40 bcm/year. That is equivalent to 8% of current global LNG trade. Such a volume would be insufficient to justify the enormously expensive, technically demanding and political hazardous challenge of building a pipeline to transport the gas to southern Europe. Realistically, Egypt could play a role as a source of additional supply into the global market during seasonal peaks in demand. Yet it would have to contend with the large-scale expansions planned for LNG export capacity in Qatar, the US and Russia and with market entrants such as Mozambique and Senegal/Mauritania. There is also the risk that supply will fall below the threshold for Egypt to become even a minor export player. Rates of depletion are high in many of Egypt's offshore fields, and there is no guarantee that fresh discoveries will compensate for this, particularly if gas prices remain low. Israeli production could increase, but there are questions about economic feasibility. Cyprus has proven gas reserves, but as yet no credible programme for developing them. And by the end of the 2020s decarbonisation will have gained momentum, clouding the prospects for the development of a gas hub under the difficult financial and geopolitical circumstances in the east Mediterranean.

These issues will be considered periodically by the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which was established formally in January 2020 with its headquarters in Cairo. The founding members are Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Greece, Italy and Jordan, along with Egypt. Its purpose is to enhance co-operation among stakeholders in gas resources in the area and between them and European consumers. It is not yet clear how this forum will contribute in a practical way to regional gas development. The forum could, in theory, lobby for finance from European governments and institutions for projects such as the mooted pipeline from the east Mediterranean to southern Europe. However, there is only a brief window of opportunity to secure such finance, as the European Investment Bank is now leading the way in phasing out lending for natural gas projects as part of the wider decarbonisation strategy.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Turkey factor**

The increasingly assertive behaviour of the Turkish government in the eastern Mediterranean and in Libya and Syria has not yet had any direct impact on Egypt's natural gas operations. However, there has been some indirect impact, as it has contributed to the delay in the development of fields discovered to the south of Cyprus. The Egyptian and Greek Cypriot authorities have agreed on the principle of tying those fields to the subsea infrastructure in Egyptian waters, with a view to enabling their operators to export gas via Idku and Damietta. Turkish vessels have also undertaken some preliminary exploration activity in waters to the west of Cyprus, in the teeth of strong objections from both Greece and Republic of Cyprus. Egypt in August 2020 ratified an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with Greece, in both a gesture of solidarity and as a form of riposte to the EEZ agreement reached in 2019 by Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), running across the Mediterranean.

The maritime border disputes between Turkey on one side and Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the other do not directly affect Egypt. However, the stepped-up military support that Turkey has provided to the GNA does have a major bearing on Egypt's national security. Egypt has thrown its weight behind the House of Representatives (HoR) administration in eastern Libya and the Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by General Khalifa Haftar. Egypt formally acknowledges the UN-led political process aimed at reconciling the rival administrations, but Egyptian political cover and logistical support have played an important part in enabling General Haftar to pursue his military campaign against the GNA. This campaign was stepped up in early 2019, as the LNA advanced to the outskirts of Tripoli. However, thanks to Turkey's support, including the deployment of thousands of Syrian fighters from the Turkish-controlled enclave north of Aleppo, the LNA has been pushed back into the eastern half of the country. Since June 2020 there has been a pause in the conflict. Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has declared that he would be prepared to deploy Egyptian forces within Libya if the GNA forces attempt to push into the Sirte basin through assaults on the coastal city of Sirte and the inland Jufra airbase.

Egypt's stated rationale for its security concerns in Libya is that the GNA has provided cover for a wide range of Islamist militias with ideological affinity with extremist groups that are active within Egypt itself. President Sisi came to power through forcibly removing Mohammed Morsi from office in July 2013. Morsi (who has since died in custody) was a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been designated a terrorist organisation in Egypt since late 2013. Turkey, which has been ruled since the early 2000s by a party with roots in political Islam, condemned what it described as the coup against Morsi and has provided a safe haven for a number of prominent figures who served in his administration. Egypt under Sisi is dedicated to preventing any form of Muslim Brotherhood resurgence in the region, and has received critical support in this mission from the UAE, and in particular the leadership of Abu Dhabi. The UAE has been heavily engaged in the Libya conflict in support of the LNA.

Despite Sisi's threat to send troops into Libya, Egypt has generally pursued a multilateral approach. If there is a further outbreak of fighting, Egypt can be expected to react, but most likely through limited measures such as a deployment into the border region, bolstered by air defence deployments. It is doubtful whether either Egypt or Turkey seriously contemplate putting their respective forces in direct confrontation with each other on Libyan territory. Egypt also has the assurance that Turkey's recent moves in the Mediterranean have created a much broader slate of contentious issues to be resolved than the complex and relatively low-level conflict among Libyan factions. Nevertheless, Egypt is in the process of a major expansion of its navy, with the procurement of vessels from France, Germany, and Italy, as a means to boost its maritime defence capability and to bolster the security of the valuable natural gas installations off its Mediterranean coastline.

The launch of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in October 2020 under the auspices of a newly appointed UN envoy, Stephanie Williams, offers the prospect of a reduction in regional political tensions over Libya. The advent of a new administration in the U.S. could also foster a less abrasive approach to regional issues from Turkey. Definitive resolution of issues such as the Libyan political system and the Cyprus question is likely to remain elusive. However, any reduction in tensions will create a better environment for Egypt to make progress with its efforts to sustain its own natural gas surplus, while tying its gas export infrastructure to new fields in neighbouring countries. Whether this will result in a significant scaling up of Egypt-

based LNG exports will ultimately depend on broader trends in global energy, in particular the rate at which fossil fuels are phased out.

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<sup>1</sup> BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2020, 69<sup>th</sup> Edition*, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2020-full-report.pdf>

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## Russia Navigates Complex Competing Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Since the 2015 onset Russia's military campaign in Syria, Moscow's position and stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean have drastically changed. Over the course of the past five years, the Syrian civil war has become interlinked with several other conflict zones in the region while at the same time the Syrian government has failed to end the war and rebuild the country's institutions, both necessary prerequisites for Syria's reconstruction. Legitimizing its open intervention in Syria with the promise to restore peace and stability, Russia's unfulfilled mission in Syria impacts the conduct of its relations in the rest of the Eastern Mediterranean basin, in which Russia's main objective is to find the optimal balance in its relations with all the Eastern Mediterranean actors who are on opposing sides of the region's lines of conflict.

### The Challenge of Interlinked Conflict Zones

The interlinkage of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern conflicts has produced a dynamic where relations between regional actors as well as the coalitions are in a rapid state of flux, be it in ongoing active conflicts, such as Libya and Yemen or the newly "hot" stages of more dormant conflicts such as the maritime boundary disputes between Turkey and Greece and between Turkey and Cyprus. This new dynamic makes it more difficult for Moscow to balance its quite positive relations with all regional players and to avoid direct involvement in conflicts between them, as the Kremlin maintains little appetite for intervention between Eastern Mediterranean states. Some of the region's geopolitical rivalries could even lead to new stage of conflict between Russia and the West. At the very least, the heightened tensions along regional fault lines and could negatively impact Moscow's extensive economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### The Challenge of the Uncompleted Mission in Syria

Russia has not yet achieved the declared goals of its Syrian military intervention, neither in political nor economic terms. Russia has not fully achieved its political objective of guaranteeing Syrian statehood nor restoring a dialogue with the West as result. Similarly, Russia has not experienced any of the potential economic benefits, neither from the joint development of Syria's natural resources nor from contracts for reconstruction projects that have yet to materialize. The reason is lack of sufficient progress in the political institution-building and the restoration of full sovereignty over Syria's entire territory. The Syrian conflict has reached a more complicated stage compared with 2015-2017, because the military campaign remains unfinished while Russia, laden with responsibility as the self-proclaimed Syrian "peace-builder," has to demonstrate some results in reconstruction and institution-building. Russia's goal to demonstrate a new type of conflict resolution – with better results than the West's debacles in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – has yet to be accomplished.

## Libya

In Libya during the last couple of years, Moscow has been attempting to maintain an "equidistance" from both the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-supported Libyan National Army. Moscow has sought to position itself as a mediator in the negotiation process. Despite widespread speculation that Russia's supports Haftar with an expectation to receive a military base in eastern Libya in return or that combat personnel from the Russian private military company Wagner are deployed in Libya in support of Haftar, these rumours have never been proved. On the contrary, Russia is a consistent supporter of the United Nations' role and would never undermine the UN-recognized government in Tripoli that, among other things, gave Russia an opportunity to sit at the negotiating table during the various international conferences on Libya hosted respectively by France, Italy, and Germany from 2018 through 2020. The decisions on the ceasefire and weapons embargo taken during the January 2020 Berlin conference were supported by Russia. After Haftar's military campaign to capture Tripoli and Turkey's overt military intervention in support the GNA efforts to drive back Haftar's assault, it became clear that Russia's room for manoeuvre had narrowed. Subsequent official declarations by Russia and Turkey asserting that there was no military solution to the conflict signified that neither Moscow nor Ankara are ready to take steps detrimental to their respective interests and their reputations in the international arena.

For Turkey, the continuation of the military operation would mean open conflict with the EU, which adheres to a negotiated solution as well as open conflict with those countries that backed Haftar. For Russia, open support of Turkey's further military operation would not only damage Russia's international reputation, but could also be detrimental for Moscow's important ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. But the very fact that Turkey's military forces in Libya are operating on a perceived legitimate and legal basis, having been invited by Libya's internationally recognized government, renders Turkey's presence in Libya parallel to Russia's presence in Syria. And, the decision of Moscow and Ankara to form joint working groups<sup>1</sup> on Libya seems to reveal an attempt to apply something akin to the Astana Framework for cooperation in Syria to the Libyan context.

Moscow's position in Libya is more complicated than that of Turkey because Moscow is not prepared to make a formal commitment to a particular side. At the same time, Moscow's policy of "equidistance" means that Russia is not, and will not be, fully trusted by either the side – a position quite detrimental for Russia's economic interests in Libya.

Another factor leading to the diminishing of Russia's influence seems to be the possible restoration of the U.S. role in the region and in the Libya conflict, in particular. The opinion exists in Russia that the U.S. role in the new 21 August 2020 ceasefire signalled a new phase in Washington's efforts to reduce Moscow's role in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean as a whole. Despite the fact that Russia officially welcomed<sup>2</sup> any mediation that could provide a ceasefire, the critical approach of the Russian authorities to the role of NATO and some EU members to the collapse of Libyan statehood is well-known and, as a consequence, Moscow is quite sceptical about the positive results of Washington's mediation. The U.S.-Russia relationship has so deteriorated nowadays that it is easy to imagine that Libya can become just another battlefield in the Moscow-Washington tussle in which the U.S. will try to marginalize Russia in the negotiating process.

## East Mediterranean Escalation

The Turkey-Libya agreement on maritime boundaries in conjunction with Ankara's military intervention in Libya has created a new geopolitical reality in Eastern Mediterranean provoking a new escalation between Turkey and Greece. This new reality is quite complicated for Russia. Should Moscow publicly support Turkey's approach, it would immediately further damage Russia's relations with Greece, as well Russia-EU relations in general, both of which are already in a state of deterioration. In this conflict, Russia again is trying to position itself "equidistant" from both sides by affirming international law, maritime law (i.e. the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) and UN resolutions. The same applies for Moscow's attitude toward Greece's decision to extend its exclusive economic zone: Moscow's position is that this extension does not immediately infringe upon Russia's interests, but should it do so in the future Russia reserves the right to address the issue.<sup>3</sup> The very sharp responses by Russian officials to accusations from some quarters that Russia supports Turkish "expansionist" politics in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>4</sup> suggest Russia will attempt to avoid any possible involvement into this conflict. There seems to be several reasons for Russia's position.

Any debate about whether islands generate exclusive economic zones and who has legal rights to drill for offshore natural gas in the waters around Cyprus immediately raises the issue of sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moscow has no appetite for opening an international debate on this topic in relation to the Republic of Cyprus, which constitutes an important partner for Russia. Russia also is not interested engaging in an issue that would cause further deterioration in Russia-EU relations. Despite the quite moderate position of Germany and Italy, many EU members have taken quite a harsh position against Turkey's politics in Mediterranean, with France even dispatching naval assets to the Aegean Sea for joint military exercises with Greece.

Besides the traditionally high economic significance of Cyprus for Russia, the recent U.S. decisions to extend its military presence in Greece and Cyprus are a cause of concern for Russian policymakers. The U.S. decision to lift the Cyprus arms embargo follows in line with Washington's ambitions to expand its military footprint on the island. The U.S. attempted to pressure Cyprus and Greece to close their ports for Russia's naval forces, but both Nicosia and Athens have so far refused.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, some Russian experts are concerned that U.S. assistance to the axis of Greece-Cyprus-Israel, especially Washington's support for their proposed East Med pipeline project, indicates a U.S. commitment to reducing Russia's share in Europe's natural gas market.<sup>6</sup> Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly declared that Washington's Eastern Mediterranean energy and security partnership initiative<sup>7</sup> is directed against Russia-Cyprus and Russia-Greece relations.<sup>8</sup> For its part, Moscow continues to invest diplomatically in relations with Greece and Cyprus, as reflected by the recent visits of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, Moscow's support for Turkey's "expansionist" politics in Mediterranean would be diplomatic suicide in terms of Russia's relations with Athens and Nicosia — pushing both even closer to the United States. Moreover, it could also strain Russia's relations with Egypt and Israel.

In terms of Russia's economic interests, a pro-Turkish policy runs contrary to Russia's own stakes in Eastern Mediterranean energy development. Russian energy companies have been present in the Eastern Mediterranean for over six years. Russia's Rosneft acquired 30% stake in Egypt's all-important Zohr natural gas field. Russian energy company Novatek has formed a

consortium with Italy's Eni and France's Total to explore for gas deposits in Lebanon. Russian companies also were invited to explore the coastal regions of Syria<sup>10</sup>. In addition, Russian firms are negotiating the sale of Israeli gas to East Asia in the form of LNG. In an era of depressed energy prices, Russia has a keen interest in taking part in most gas projects in the Levantine basin, preferring to protect its European market share through partnerships in the development Eastern Mediterranean natural gas.

Finally, an escalation of the conflict in Eastern Mediterranean can directly influence Russia's immediate neighbourhood. For example, Azerbaijan has already openly proclaimed its full support for Turkey's politics in the region, looking askance on Moscow's and Athens' growing military cooperation with Armenia as well as Armenia's alignment with Cyprus.<sup>11</sup> Armenia is Eurasian Economic Union member, requiring Russia to maintain a carefully balanced approach in the South Caucasus, including any potential spill-over effects from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean complicates Russia's geopolitical and geo-economic position. From the geopolitical point of view, Moscow is best served by abstaining from taking a position on Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundary disputes but is finding it increasingly difficult to stay above the fray. Cooperation between Moscow and Ankara in Syria and now in Libya causes other players to perceive Russia as tacitly supporting Turkey's "expansionist" posture in the Eastern Mediterranean. Against the backdrop of "Navalny poisoning" and the situation in Belorussia that have seen Russia-EU relations reach a new low point, Moscow has little interest in adding further controversy to the already troubled relationship. The deterioration in Turkey-EU relations also does not serve Russia's interests, as Moscow still holds out some hope for possible EU cooperation for Syria's reconstruction. And if all the Astana Framework partners in Syria – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – have adversarial with the EU it will reduce the likelihood any EU participation the joint reconstruction of Syria. From geo-economic point of view, escalation is even detrimental for Moscow as it can greatly reduce Russia's chances to participate in Mediterranean energy projects, especially given the uncertain future for "Nord Stream-2", the reduction in global energy demand, and growing risks of new sanctions for Russian energy companies.

### **The Next Steps in Syria**

The visit of an official Russian delegation headed by Vice-Premier Yury Borisov and Foreign Minister Lavrov to Syria on 7 September 2020 symbolized Russia's deep involvement in Syria's reconstruction. As Lavrov's first visit to Damascus since 2012, the delegation's visit was perceived as marking the end of the "military" phase and the start of a new "reconstruction" phase for Russia's involvement in Syria. During press-conference Minister Lavrov stated that, with the help of Russia, Syria has managed to withstand the fight against international terrorism and "those forces who wanted to destroy Syrian statehood."<sup>12</sup> According to Lavrov some hotbeds of terrorism are still present but they are not an obstacle to starting the reconstruction process. The situation in Idlib is improving and the territory controlled by the central government is widening.

The general assessment of the "Astana format" and the Russia-Turkey-Iran partnership is positive, despite some differences among the partners. All the three "guarantors" have affirmed their commitment to Syria's territorial integrity, preventing the materialization of the "Libyan

scenario" for Syria. With regards to economic reconstruction, this visit brought the actualization of roadmaps signed in 2018. It was also announced that a new agreement on all spheres of cooperation would be signed by December 2020. The reconstruction agreement will include over 40 infrastructure projects. Recently, Russia has held out hope for EU participation in the joint reconstruction of Syria. The main obstacle to more active involvement of European companies in Syria's reconstruction is the "nature" of Assad regime and the EU's unwillingness to enable him to retain power. Another obstacle for both Russian and European companies are sanctions. Even Russian energy companies are reluctant to risk violating sanctions despite the official invitation of the Syrian government to explore for offshore energy. An additional complicating factor is the position of the United States, which is evolving towards greater rigidity. Washington believes that maximum pressure tactics may work in the case of Syria as they have done in Iran. The U.S. administration is not only unwilling to discuss the issue of easing sanctions, but will also use extraterritorial secondary sanctions to prevent any involvement by European companies. Although the Russian authorities will try to encourage the participation of some Russian companies in Syria's reconstruction, it is clear that the scale of this involvement will be much less than what was previously hoped. Additionally, territories in Syria that are rich in energy resources are still controlled by Kurds under U.S. influence.

One of the central problems for reconstruction that cannot be easily remedied by Russia is the internal legitimacy of the political regime and its sustainability without external military support. A constitutional process has started, but there is no official timetable for its completion. Some Russian experts assert that the relations between the central government and local authorities and various local entities are quite dysfunctional. No new model has been implemented for administrative cooperation with centre,<sup>13</sup> making the regime very vulnerable to destabilization from either outside forces or internal separatism. Thus, institution-building is one of the most needed yet most difficult tasks, requiring not only Russian support but primarily internal domestic dialogue and a constitutional process.

### **New regional tendencies and balances**

In the beginning of 2020, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict also developed a new dynamic with the U.S. President's proposed "deal of the century." Moscow criticised this approach as a form of "blackmail" that ignores the interests of Palestine<sup>14</sup>. Russian experts forecast no future for this "stillborn" initiative, reflecting similar views in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iran, and the Arab League. As an alternative, Russia proposed starting direct negotiations between Palestine and Israel mediated by the Quartet on the Middle East composed of Russia, the EU, the U.S., and the UN, with Moscow as the negotiating venue. Moscow welcomed the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, while Russia's partners in Syria – Turkey and Iran – reacted negatively, as did Palestine. These new regional balances will definitely need more sophisticated Russian diplomacy to utilize new opportunities and to navigate new constraints.

Recent tendencies in the region towards politicization on the basis of religious identity have caused wide concern in the Russian policy community. Moscow officially is trying to remain distant from religious discourse in foreign affairs. Russia's neutral position on the reconversion of Hagia Sofia from a museum to mosque reflects Russia's strong aversion to inserting religious issues into geopolitics and geo-economics. Adhering to this policy orientation, the position of Russia government diverged markedly from the Russian Orthodox Patriarchy. Although the

Russian Orthodox Church publicly denounced Turkey's decision, Russian President Vladimir Putin unequivocally declared the matter an internal Turkish issue falling within the sovereign authority of the Turkish government to decide.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020 is moving towards greater volatility and unpredictability. Escalation of existing conflicts, new leadership dynamics, changing balances among regional coalitions, and interference by non-regional actors render Russia's position in the region more fragile and vulnerable. Despite some objective success in the Syrian peace process, several beneficial economic agreements and completed infrastructure projects such as Turkstream, developing military and technical cooperation with some countries of the region, and the absence of conflicts with regional players, Russia's image in the region is quite mosaic and established partnerships are influenced by too many internal and external factors. Russia is constantly trying to position itself as a 'fair broker' or 'unbiased mediator' in regional conflicts, as well as a pragmatic economic partner in regional geo-economics. In some cases, Moscow does manage to succeed in demonstrating its influence in regional affairs. The numerous cross-cutting regional cleavages, as well as the involvement of non-regional actors that perceive Russia as an adversary, form objective constraints that are likely to continue to limit Moscow's ability to strengthen its position in the Eastern Mediterranean in the region in the near future.

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# The Eastern Mediterranean Military Environment From a NATO Perspective

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Russia's hybrid aggression against Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea in Spring 2014 has fundamentally changed the security situation in Europe. Geopolitics are back: Russia acts as a destructive, revisionist power and a strategic adversary of the West, while China's strategic approach to expand its global influence and collect strategic assets give reason to consider it a systemic rival rather than a competitive partner. For peace, security and prosperity in Europe in this new geopolitical environment, unity and resolve in key multilateral institutions, the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union (EU), remains essential for strengthening deterrence and defence and for protection of the international rules-based order.

In this geopolitical context, the recent and ongoing developments in the Eastern Mediterranean pose a great concern for NATO as well as the EU. A vacuum left by the U.S. in Syria has been filled by an enhanced Russian presence and similarly in Libya. China's influence over critical infrastructure in the region is growing. At the same time, old tensions between Turkey and Greece over unresolved maritime boundaries claims and access to offshore energy resources have reached a new and dangerous level. If not handled with care, the current tensions might escalate to a military confrontation between two NATO Allies – an unacceptable situation that could compromise European deterrence and defence capabilities in the face of challenges from Russia and China.

While the complex, multi-faceted dispute between Turkey and Greece is political in nature and requires patient negotiations and diplomatic efforts to reach a solution, NATO has a critical part to play to successfully facilitate such as process in conjunction with the European Union. Facing unprecedented geopolitical challenges, Europeans are faced with the strategic imperative to resolve the tension amongst its allies and partners in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

## The Impact of New Geopolitical Realities on NATO's Perspective

NATO's view of the Eastern Mediterranean's conflict lines is based upon a global geopolitical perspective that regards the region as being at the intersection of Europe's southern and eastern flanks. Three decades after the end of the Cold War that resulted in a Europe "whole, free and at peace," NATO has renewed concerns about Russia posing a potential threat to the territorial integrity of NATO member states both in the Baltic and the Black Sea region. In addition, NATO also needs to cope with a potential new threat from China, which is aggressively expanding its influence in Europe as well as Asia with its so-called Belt and Road Initiative.

While Europe faces these new threats and challenges, the United States, under the administration of President Donald Trump, is reducing its engagement with Europe, which may result in a decreased commitment to NATO and Europe's security more generally. Concurrently, the European Union has been weakened by Brexit and internal splits caused by diverging national interests concerning migration, post-Corona economics and illiberal

tendencies in some EU member states. The European Union is struggling to define its position amidst the systemic competition between the U.S. and China.

In this strategic environment, the North Atlantic Alliance is focused on maintaining the unity and resolve achieved at the summits of Wales (2014), Warsaw (2016) and Brussels (2018) to strengthen deterrence and defence, while offering the possibility of dialogue with Russia. At a crossroads, the European NATO member states also need to decide if they will provide more forces and capabilities for collective defence and accept a fairer burden sharing in order “to keep the Russians out and the Americans in”, through a stronger European pillar in NATO. Alternatively, and less likely, EU member states may opt to develop a degree of European “sovereignty” or “autonomy,” with the aim to reach collectively a “great power” status similar to the United States, China, or Russia. In any case, in military terms the Europeans need to contribute much more for defence and, politically, the Americans expect them to take care of their own region and Europe’s periphery with less dependence on US military assets.

While high-intensive collective defence will clearly remain NATO’s core function, the EU will become more prepared for crisis management at lower levels, as far as it is manageable with its broad array of diplomatic, economic and also military means, and the EU will be more focused on the security challenges in Europe’s southern and south-eastern periphery. If in case of a confrontation in the Mediterranean between any neighbouring country and an EU member state, NATO would not be able to act due to a lack of consensus, the EU would be in charge of protecting the interests of member states. The EU has substantive non-military power tools to cope successfully with a regional challenge, and with regard to military means, the EU has its assigned “Battle Group” forces and other capabilities at its disposal. What really matters are the substantive forces, which in case of a military conflict could be made available from the national defence postures of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and all the other EU member states, based on Art 42(7) Lisbon Treaty. Although this will never be enough to credibly deter and defend vis-à-vis Russia, and longer-term perhaps China, it will always be sufficient to protect the EU’s security interests against any other potential challengers in the region.

### **The International Rules-based Order is Challenged**

For NATO, the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean form part of larger challenges to the international rules-based order, which the North Atlantic alliance has committed itself to defend. Thus, the priority is to preserve the multilateral functioning of NATO, in which Europe's Atlantic bond with the United States is preserved and the European pillar of the alliance itself is enhanced by a synergy with the European Union. Only closer multilateral cooperation through NATO will preserve peace and security in Europe, a fundamental prerequisite for the EU to maintain its level of prosperity in a more highly contested global order with more robust economic competitors. If Europe is to remain an international player and not become simply an international playing field for others, it must preserve the key multilateral Western institutions, namely NATO and the EU. This is an indispensable strategic imperative for the nations of Europe, including for Turkey, as is the development and strengthening of close partnerships with like-minded non-European nations. Underlying NATO's positions on various issues regarding the Eastern Mediterranean is the need to fulfil this imperative.

## Global Geopolitics and the Eastern Mediterranean

While the U.S. is not leaving Europe, it has reduced its presence in the greater Middle East. A policy priority of the Trump administration, the policy itself maintains a consistency with the previous Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia', with an increased focus on the Indo-Pacific and China as the perceived primary adversary. While White House seeks better terms from its European partners, Washington remains keen to stay engaged in Europe and not create openings for Russian adventurism. Moreover, NATO's multilateral framework for the deployment of American power in Europe retains consistent support in the U.S. Congress.

Since 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided to position Russia as a strategic adversary of the West, abandoning a once hoped-for strategic partnership. Russia's opportunistic and destructive course of action in the Ukraine conflict has proved Putin to be a risk taker. Demonstrating a broad range of military options from hybrid to high intensity warfighting, Russia maintains the potential for a regional invasion combined with escalation dominance by nuclear means. Russia again used its military options to skilfully fill the vacuum left by the U.S., including the creation of an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) bubble that has provided a strong position for Moscow on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia likewise now plays an active military role in the conflict in Libya. In the Black Sea, Russia's strong maritime presence and its A2/AD capabilities in Crimea allow Russia to dominate a large part of the region.

A more subtle, but perhaps more profound, challenge to the Western liberal order concurrently emanates from China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Based on China's own model that has created economic prosperity for a significant percentage of its population while maintaining a police state that disregards human rights, liberal democracy, and the rule of law, the BRI is a form of economic expansion that has already become a powerful force within several European economies, increasing its influence over Europe's commercial transportation infrastructure and its capacity for technological development. China has become a peer competitor with Europe on its own doorstep, increasing its grip on critical maritime ports across the Mediterranean basin. While still holding out the possibility of developing a relationship based on a competitive economic and trade partnership, China also has the potential to be a systemic rival or even a strategic adversary for Europe.

With the twin expansion of Russian and Chinese influence globally, one of NATO's greatest concerns is the evolving military cooperation between the West's strategic adversary Russia and the West's systemic rival China. There are clear indications that their relationship has shifted from perpetual rivalry. Already a de-facto cooperation against the West has evolved based on congruent interests, although not within the framework of a formal military alliance. This "ganging-up against the West" by both great powers in a coordinated manner is highly dangerous for the security situation in Europe, and could be played out in the Eastern Mediterranean.

If the U.S. continues to focus on a possible conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific at the expense of maintaining its military presence in Europe, deterrence and defence capabilities in the European theatre would be significantly weakened. With Europe filling the gap, a weakened deterrence and defence posture in Europe would change the Kremlin's risk calculus. The opportunistic incentive to risk regional conflict, be it in the Baltic, the Black Sea or the Eastern

Mediterranean region, would be particularly high. The undermining of NATO's deterrence and defence capacities are further challenged by the involvement of Chinese state-run enterprises in the fields of digital and other technologies that can ultimately hamper the functioning of NATO's command, control and communications capabilities by compromising intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Rapid response capabilities could similarly be compromised due to a lack of independent logistical capabilities to move and deploy forces.<sup>1</sup>

While NATO retains its mission to be ready to deter, prevent and, if necessary, fight and win a regional war with a near peer state actor who continues to be a nuclear superpower, crisis management with comprehensive civil-military missions has become an increasingly prominent feature of NATO's mission in Europe's south and east, particularly in the greater Middle East and North Africa region, including the Sahel. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has played a key role in NATO stabilization on Europe's south-eastern borders, both as a bridge and a hub. Since March 2014, Turkey has again become again a cornerstone at NATO's southern flank with regard to deterrence and collective defence in a potential regional crisis and conflict with Russia.

At the same time, the European component of NATO is itself divided in the southern flank. French President Emmanuel Macron's assessment that is NATO "brain dead" was not constructive and reflects the French mindset that has always been more European than trans-Atlantic. Turkey, under the leadership President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, raises questions about the country's aggressive rhetoric, regional power ambitions driven by neo-Ottoman nostalgia, and troubling tactical relationship with Russia. Compounding these tensions is Prime Minister Boris Johnson's post-Brexit Britain that weakens NATO and the United Kingdom itself. In parallel, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's slow and reluctant manner to implement pledges and commitments to which Germany has already agreed, also detracts from NATO. An exasperated United States expects the European nations to solve their security issues on their own, despite the unlikelihood that the Europeans will be able to meet these expectations.

### **The Eastern Mediterranean as a regional challenge for NATO**

The Eastern Mediterranean is particularly challenging for NATO because at the heart of the conflict is a dispute between two member states that joined the Alliance together in 1952. From NATO's perspective the deteriorating and potentially explosive conflict is an odd challenge for NATO as it is a regional conflict whose solution generally lies outside the framework of NATO's responsibilities.

In a recent webinar on the Eastern Mediterranean organized by the German Atlantic Association,<sup>2</sup> Ambassador (ret.) Martin Erdmann,<sup>3</sup> a seasoned diplomat experienced in Turkey-NATO relations, identified three fields in this current political conflict: 1) Provocative military actions conducted by Turkey for many decades at sea and in the air with regard to the islands in the eastern Aegean Sea, 2) The one-sided declaration of a new maritime boundary delimitation by Turkey and Libya in contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and 3) The unilateral licensing blocks for natural gas exploration around Cyprus.

German policy circles also view these problems as being compounded by a more fundamental complication, namely the incongruity between NATO and the EU – a problem that was sharpened by Cyprus' 2004 admission to the European Union without a settlement for the

unification of the ethnically divided island.<sup>4</sup> Widely regarded as the EU's mismanagement of the Cyprus issue, coordinated action between Greece and Cyprus has precluded the possibility of deepening Turkey's relationship with the EU. Given Turkey's NATO membership, institutional coordination between NATO and the EU is not possible. Both Brussels and Berlin hold out the hope for the modernization of Turkey's customs union with the EU as a way out of the impasse.<sup>5</sup>

All of the abovementioned issues, as well as other relevant factors such as Turkey's hosting of 5 million refugees, are discussed in detail by other authors in this volume and need no further elaboration here. However, it is also important to note that there is a recognition in Germany policy circles that one of the root causes underlying many of these problems is the "long shadow of history" cast by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty that set the borders for the modern Republic of Turkey but which did not resolve the problem of Greek islands in close proximity to the Turkish coastline. Perceived in Turkey as being imposed by the victorious powers in World War I, Turkey's borders and the issue of Turkish sovereignty remain highly charged in the political psychology of Turkey.

### **What Can NATO do?**

The disputes among Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus have now drawn the entire European Union into the Eastern Mediterranean conflict. The European Council is scheduled to decide in December 2020 whether to take action against Turkey, a political process in which NATO has no authority to intervene. Any resolution whether through bilateral or multilateral negotiations must be achieved in a framework outside of NATO. Even in the case of a military escalation, NATO would not be able to act<sup>6</sup> without the consensus of all its members, including both Greece and Turkey. The EU would not have such a problem, it could act in consensus, based on its obligations to protect member states.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, NATO can play a critical role in de-escalation to prevent a crisis that could rupture the alliance. In addition to being a defence organization, NATO is also a political forum for the prevention of conflicts, the stabilization of crisis situations, and reducing tensions that could risk the peace of Europe. Within this framework of responsibilities, NATO can offer de-escalation mechanisms in relation to maritime boundary conflicts between Turkey and Greece. NATO has always been very successful in calming tensions and played a helpful role in preventing an escalation between allies.

Of course, NATO has a fundamental interest in the success of such efforts. The worst case for the Alliance would be that two allies fight against each other rather than finding a peaceful solution that leads to a reasonable settlement acceptable to all parties. A military confrontation between NATO allies would only benefit the alliance's common geopolitical rivals.

NATO is a custodian of this rules-based order with its regional responsibility for the Euro-Atlantic area and Europe's southern and south-eastern periphery. This includes the Eastern Mediterranean. As the Alliance cannot tolerate China's attempt to change maritime boundaries in the South China Sea nor Russia's behaviour against the Ukraine, where territorial borders were changed by military force for the first time in Europe since 1945, NATO could not tolerate Turkey using force against a fellow ally to change the Eastern Mediterranean's maritime boundaries. Thus, the escalating military confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece undermines NATO's core functions – credible deterrence and collective

defence, crisis management and promotion of partnerships – posing an unacceptable level of danger to Europe.

## Conclusions

We need NATO, in unity and resolve, to guarantee peace and stability in Europe and its periphery. For that purpose, we need not only the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany for both collective defence vis-a-vis Russia and crisis management at Europe's southern periphery. For both roles, also Turkey is needed as a key member of the Alliance. This is in the interest of the European frontline states in the East and South, and it is not less in Turkey's own interest. There is a fundamental consensus on this point in the German Government and the wider German policy community.

Nevertheless, perceptions matter. In the past, Kemal Atatürk's Turkey was always seen as a rock-solid ally, deliberately linked to the West through NATO. Today, the view has changed. Erdogan's Turkey is perceived as still part of the solution, but also part of a problem. It is not that clear anymore, how far Turkey remains committed to the Western values and principles for which NATO and the EU stand. In addition to the old tensions with Greece and Cyprus, and the rather new Turkish ambition to play again the role of a regional power, we have seen in recent months an unfortunate and highly emotional controversy on fundamental issues regarding liberal versus religious values between Macron's France and Erdogan's Turkey. This has made the relationship even more complicated.

With regard to the Eastern Mediterranean dispute itself, the success of any diplomatic process is predicated upon both sides recognizing that neither side can achieve its maximalist demands. Although Turkey's uneasiness with an order imposed in 1923 with the Lausanne Treaty is understandable, as is Turkey's desire to have access to its fair share of natural resources, it is unacceptable for a change in the status quo to be achieved through the coercive use of force. Within the framework of the European Union, Germany can be expected to constructively facilitate such an approach between Turkey and Greece. We all have a common interest to keep Europe free, prosperous and at peace, and to maintain the international rules-based order which worked so well for decades. The objectives require the preservation of the unity and solidarity of the Atlantic Alliance. The Eastern Mediterranean crisis calls for a much closer cooperation between NATO and the EU to create a synergy between their respective instruments of power. In this manner, NATO can serve the interests of all its member states and secure Europe's continued prosperity in the new global geopolitical environment.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1990, in a NATO-Article 5 context, a German Surface to Air missile unit could not rapidly be deployed to Turkey by a contracted Antonov aircraft, due to a "Nyet" from Moscow for two weeks.

<sup>2</sup> Multiple participants, "Krisenregion östliches Mittelmeer" [German] (online webinar forum), *Deutsche Atlantische Gesellschaft*, 25 August 2020, <https://ata-dag.de/atlantic-talk-onlinediskussion/krisenregion-oestliches-mittelmeer-machtkampf-um-die-vorherrschaft/10037/>

<sup>3</sup> Martin Erdmann, Ambassador (retired), German Ambassador to Turkey 2015-2020, Permanent Representative to NATO until 2015; See Erdmann's remarks in Multiple participants, "Krisenregion östliches Mittelmeer".

<sup>4</sup> Roderich Kiesewetter, Member of the German Parliament, CDU/CSU Spokesperson in the Foreign Committee; See Kiesewetter's remarks in Multiple participants, "Krisenregion östliches Mittelmeer".

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for both multilateral organizations, the very negative impact has been a significantly reduced by formal cooperation, although the need for much closer cooperation in the field of security and defence is obvious. Both organizations have tried, with some success, to work around the problem by intensified staff-to-staff contacts and

pragmatic cooperation. However, this is only an insufficient substitute for full and close systematic cooperation between both organisations with the full involvement of their member states.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Article 5 Washington Treaty

<sup>7</sup> In accordance with Article 42(7) Lisbon Treaty

# Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean: Navigating Complexity, Mitigating Conflict(s) and Fishing for Compromise

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states face daunting challenges in their near abroad, placing Europe in new and uncharted waters with regards to allies, partners and adversaries alike. Among these challenges, the Eastern Mediterranean stands out as a key testing ground for EU action. The vacuum left by the U.S.'s relative retrenchment has been filled by the increasingly proactive policies of other actors, including European states, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Russia and even the Arab Gulf states of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, transforming the Eastern Mediterranean – and arguably the Mediterranean more broadly – into a significant geopolitical hotspot of overlapping claims for regional *and* international primacy.

It is precisely this internationalisation that poses direct challenges to Europe. While the Mediterranean was once considered an insulated region where transatlantic partners had ensured relative stability, new and old conflict lines are being exploited to re-awaken jingoisms, as multiple actors are engaging in dangerous brinkmanship to improve their negotiating positions and consolidate political support at home. The increasing influence of domestic politics in the policies of almost all the actors involved in the Eastern Mediterranean adds a further layer of complexity, narrowing the room for compromises or diplomacy.

Building upon the contributions in this volume that examine the viewpoints and policies of Eastern Mediterranean actors themselves, this study will address the EU's preferred approach to the Eastern Mediterranean security complex and analyse the respective perspectives and policy priorities adopted by Germany, France and Italy – highlighting their different approaches and how these fit into the overall prism of EU efforts aimed at de-escalating tensions by disentangling Eastern Mediterranean conflict lines.

## EU Foreign Policy and the Eastern Mediterranean Security Complex

As seen from Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean security complex involves (at least) three interlinked conflicts and three dimensions of EU policy interests. At its core stands the decades old Turkish-Greek conflict over maritime demarcation lines, followed by the conflict over the divided island of Cyprus and, finally, the war in Libya. With regards to dimensions of EU foreign policy, these span 1) the bilateral EU-Turkey relationship – the stalled (and now buried) accession talks, negotiations over the customs union and visa liberalization, and the issue of migration and Turkey's backsliding on democratic norms; 2) NATO and West-Russia tensions – US retrenchment, European energy dependencies, and internal EU divisions on policy towards Moscow; and 3) Broader instabilities and geopolitical conflicts in the MENA region – particularly the growing rivalry pitting Turkey and Qatar against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Israel.

Additionally, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a significant source of internal tensions among EU member states themselves. Multiple actors are jockeying for influence over the direction of EU policy, the role of NATO, and the positioning of the EU in this new international context. Conflicting priorities between Italy and France concerning the Mediterranean, Libya, and Turkey are important in this regard, as are French-German tensions over the leadership of EU foreign policy and French President Emmanuel Macron's rhetorical questioning of NATO. While these disagreements have been growing in intensity, particularly with regards to Libya, lines of cooperation and mutual interests among EU member states are also holding. Italian-French energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean is one example, as is the broader security cooperation between Rome and Paris in Africa's Sahel region, and the joint Italian-French-Greek-Cypriot military naval drills in the Mediterranean.

The NATO alliance had served as an important avenue for Europe and the U.S. to maintain stability and deterrence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the strategic meeting point between Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Turkey, as a key NATO member, has performed indispensable functions contributing to the containment of Russia in both the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The fraying of the trans-Atlantic framework of relations with Turkey stands out as a key factor in the present instabilities. A key turning point in the deterioration was the 2004 collapse of the UN-backed Annan Plan for the reunification of Cyprus and the subsequent according EU membership to the Republic of Cyprus notwithstanding previous assurances that membership would be conditioned on a resolution of the conflict. The beginning of EU-Turkey accession talks in 2005 and NATO's continued promotion of de-confliction between Athens and Ankara masked a deeper problem in the trans-Atlantic framework. As Europe's deep divisions over Turkey's accession prospects became clear, the Republic of Cyprus' EU membership, in addition to Greece, became a sticking point on any issue related to Turkey given the unanimity requirement in Europe's decision-making process. As EU-Turkey accession talks stalled, the outbreak of mass protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in late 2010 and the subsequent new concerns for the EU and NATO over increased migration flows, terrorism, and the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) led the trans-Atlantic framework to lose its focus on Cyprus, content with simply managing the frozen Greek-Turkish *détente*.

Concurrently, major natural gas deposits were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, adding a new dimension to the evolving security complex. While reawakening European interest in the region as a means for the EU to alleviate its dependency on Russian gas imports, the prospect of offshore natural gas development exacerbated the latent Greek-Turkish dispute over maritime boundaries and sovereign rights over offshore resources. The natural gas finds linked several Middle Eastern disputes to the Eastern Mediterranean security complex, as exploration activities and discoveries were not confined solely to Greek, Cypriot and Israeli waters, but also in Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian maritime zones. These trends spurred important realignments in the region, leading to the development of new energy and geopolitical alliances between Israel, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus and growing grievances in Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

Following Russia's 2015 intervention, Moscow re-emerged as a key factor in the *both* the Middle East and the Mediterranean,<sup>2</sup> underscoring the growing interlinkages between Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Russia's Syrian intervention eventually pushed Turkey to engage its northern neighbour, developing a complex working relationship with Moscow, both in Syria and later in Libya. With the EU-Turkey relationship already harmed by the stalled

accession talks and migration tensions, trust further eroded with Turkey's increased authoritarian bent following the unsuccessful 2016 military coup and Erdogan's constitutional reform drive.

Europe and the U.S. generally failed to understand the causal interlinkages among these events – largely ignoring the rising role of Russia, Turkey's growing disillusionment with Europe, and the depth of Ankara's grievances vis-à-vis the emerging energy and geostrategic alignments that effectively excluded Ankara. In several instances, Europe actively encouraged a number of these events that alienated Turkey. The developing Israel-Greece-Cyprus and Israel-Egypt-Greece energy triangles have enjoyed important support from EU institutions and certain member states, as well as important backing from the United States. The East Med pipeline<sup>3</sup> project as well as the newly established Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) have also benefitted from active EU support,<sup>4</sup> particularly financial support from EU institutions and political backing from Italy and, later, France.<sup>5</sup>

Observed by Ankara, these developments contributed to a growing conviction about Europe's lack of neutrality in the evolving Eastern Mediterranean dispute. Fatally undermining the previous understandings that had preserved relative stability in the region since the Cold War, Turkey's leadership became convinced of the need to be more self-reliant in foreign and security policy. As a result, Turkey embarked on the diversification of its partners and increased its reliance on proactive military policies as it sought to reassert itself as a key Mediterranean power. Turkey's readjustment to international trends of disorderly multipolarity consequently entailed Ankara's re-evaluation of its previous Western orientation given the perceived lack of solidarity from its allies concerning Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup>

The conflict in Libya provided Turkey with an opportunity to embrace a more proactive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, actualised with the November 2019 signing of military assistance and maritime demarcation agreements with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The agreements effectively fused the conflict in Libya with the Eastern Mediterranean security complex.<sup>7</sup> Eliciting condemnations from Europe, the EU declared the Libya-Turkey agreement void and approved a framework for sanctions on Turkish individuals.<sup>8</sup> France, which is aligned with Ankara's regional adversaries Egypt, the UAE, and Russia that back the eastern forces battling the Turkish-supported GNA in Tripoli, has taken the lead in calling for the EU to apply significant punitive measures against Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Tensions between Paris and Ankara crossed a new threshold with a dangerous, June 2020 incident between French and Turkish naval vessels near Libya's coastal waters, leading to a momentary French withdrawal from NATO's naval mission *Operation Sea Guardian*.<sup>10</sup> An internal NATO investigation of the incident followed, but the results have remained classified in a clear effort to avoid further tensions. Rather than stepping back, both Turkey and France doubled down on their actions. Ankara sent more troops and weapons to Libya in violation of the UN arms embargo and increased its dispatching of drill ships to contested Greek and Cypriot waters. France dispatched military assets to Greece and Cyprus, participating in joint naval drills in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup>

France's actions effectively created a grouping of closely aligned countries within Europe – France, Greece and Cyprus – pushing for a direct confrontation with Turkey, casting the dispute with Ankara as a test of European values and resolve. Seen from this angle, Turkey's violations

of European (Greek and Cypriot) sovereignty, its backsliding on democratic norms, cooperation with Russia, use of migration for political leverage, and support for political Islam are all elements that underscored Turkey's distancing from the West, requiring stern European responses. Domestic politics also plays a role in these developments, as each of these actors are utilizing external tensions to consolidate political support at home and – for France and Turkey – their leadership qualities abroad.

Faced with a dangerous naval escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, other European actors stepped into the fray, interposing themselves between the emerging rivals, counselling restraint and de-escalation to both France and Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Germany and the European Commission emerged as the most visible and active mediators in the evolving dispute. In these efforts, Berlin and Brussels have also enjoyed the tacit backing of other southern European states – most notably Italy, Spain and Malta. These states are concerned about the Mediterranean's worsening security environment, but are also similarly concerned to maintain Europe's relations with Ankara, which remains a significant strategic player in Europe's neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup>

### **Disentangling the Eastern Mediterranean Security Complex**

Europe's preferred approach in the Eastern Mediterranean is to compartmentalise disputes, disentangling conflict lines in order to dampen tensions and foster dialogue and de-confliction as first steps towards a more encompassing conflict resolution.<sup>14</sup> In addressing the region's core conflicts, an *ad hoc* division of labour has developed among EU institutions and member states. Germany has taken the lead in diplomatic efforts on Libya since late 2019, also promoting Greek-Turkish de-confliction in the Eastern Mediterranean while the High Representative for European Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has focused on the resumption of stalled negotiations in Cyprus. Concurrently, Borrell has also promoted a resumption of talks with Turkey over the stalled visa liberalization process and an updated EU-Turkey Customs Union. Backed by Italy, Spain and Malta, which maintain close trade and economic relations with Turkey, these efforts are driven by a conviction that inducements and win-win scenarios, rather than punitive measures, hold out the best chances to de-escalate tensions and create room for diplomacy. There is an understanding among these states that sanctions would likely escalate tensions, resulting in a further loss of leverage with Turkey and a diminishing willingness for compromise on the part of Greece and Cyprus.

The European Council and individual member states have issued successive declarations of condemnation of Turkish drilling activities, particularly in the wake of the Turkey-Libya maritime agreement. Such condemnation is based on solid legal grounds, given the EU's non-recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as well as its invalidation of the Turkey-Libya agreement based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). While important, such legalistic approaches also carry some risks. International law alone will not resolve the Greek-Turkish or Cyprus disputes. While legality provides important parameters, any breakthrough will fundamentally depend on the ability to compromise among actors, not on a capitulation of one side. For this, diplomacy and a degree of pragmatism will be crucial, both with regards to the mediators and to the actors involved.<sup>15</sup>

Compromise and bridging approaches will therefore be needed, particularly when it comes to the use of Greek islands in close vicinity to Turkey's coast for the demarcation of exclusive

economic zones. Yet, compromise will only be possible following de-escalation and it is on these grounds that Germany and the European Commission, with the support of Italy and other Southern European member states, have resisted calls for punitive measures on Turkey, focusing attention on intermediate steps to create a more conducive environment for diplomacy.<sup>16</sup>

Implicit in this policy is an understanding that the EU and Turkey need each other and that the existence of mutual interests and concerns can provide a groundwork to re-launch dialogue and establish the contours of a new partnership beneficial to both sides. In order to mitigate the erosion of trust, common concerns and interests should be given precedence over areas of disagreement, helping to restore avenues for dialogue which in turn can spill over and create more conducive environment to address related issues, including Libya, the core Greek-Turkish dispute and the divided island of Cyprus.

### **EU Approaches: Berlin as *'Lead Mediator'*, Paris as *'Agitator'*, and Rome as *'Balancer'***

Germany has emerged as the most active EU member state when it comes to addressing the brewing instability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Working in close synergy with the EU High Representative, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has travelled repeatedly to the region, promoting dialogue and de-escalation first in Libya and then expanding to other Eastern Mediterranean disputes. German efforts were spurred by a growing concern about an erosion of European influence over the UN-led diplomatic track in Libya. In late 2019, the diplomatic efforts of the German foreign ministry went into full gear resulting an international conference on Libya in Berlin in January 2020.<sup>17</sup> The conference effectively crowned Germany as the lead European mediator on Libya, a role that has also allowed Berlin to increase its mediation efforts on other salient issues in the Eastern Mediterranean since Germany's July 2020 assumption of the EU's rotating presidency.

By starting with Libya, an active military conflict where Turkey-French (as well as French-Italian) disagreements are most pronounced, Germany has adopted something of an 'outside-in' approach. By prioritising the Libyan conflict, the outer conflict ring from the Eastern Mediterranean perspective, Berlin has sought to mitigate the most urgent and dangerous flash point, acquiring political capital from the momentum for de-escalation in Libya that can be leveraged in addressing the Eastern Mediterranean's core conflicts. On Libya, Germany has promoted a UN-led diplomatic process, brokering – together with other actors, including Turkey and the US – a ceasefire in mid-August 2020 that builds on the Berlin Conference conclusions and is meant to favour parallel political, military and economic negotiation tracks among Libya's warring factions.

The fragile August 2020 ceasefire has proven durable and the reduction in tensions has led to a UN-mediated dialogue for the formation of a new unity government. Attempting to leverage the progress in Libya, Germany has focused on dampening tensions and reducing the risk of military miscalculations in the Turkey-Greece naval stand-off by calling for an end to provocative moves by all states.<sup>18</sup> Germany then joined its efforts with NATO and EU institutions to attempt to re-launch de-confliction mechanisms between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, a task that ultimately fell to NATO.

Germany's diplomatic foray is explained not only by Berlin's influential status in Europe, but by a perception of Germany as relatively neutral actor in the Mediterranean. No German company is involved in Eastern Mediterranean energy exploration and Berlin cleaved to a rather neutral line on Libya stretching back to the 2011 NATO intervention. Germany and Turkey have a deep and complex relationship encompassing close trade and economic ties as well as the large Turkish community in Germany. Berlin has also refrained from taking part in the growing number of military exercises in the Mediterranean, thereby positioning itself as a candidate for even-handed mediation, having both the diplomatic capacity and the international clout to carry out such a mission.

In contrast to Berlin's soft diplomacy and relatively neutral posture, France has positioned itself as an antagonist to Turkey across all conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Libya, France has supported the eastern forces backed by Egypt, the UAE, and Russia against the Turkey-supported GNA in Tripoli. In the Eastern Mediterranean, France has consistently sided with Greece and Cyprus, dispatching significant military assets to support Nicosia and Athens and joining successive naval exercises with these actors, while condemning Turkish moves as illegal and a violation of international law. Paris has also formally requested membership of the EMGF which is headquartered in Cairo and excludes Turkey. France has questioned Turkey's reliability as a "partner" for Europe and as a NATO ally.

French interests in the Eastern Mediterranean – and Mediterranean more broadly – span the energy, security and trade domains. Since 2019, the French energy company Total has become a minority partner in gas exploration in all seven Cypriot licensing blocks operated by Italy's Eni.<sup>19</sup> Total also has minority stakes in natural gas exploration operations in Egyptian waters.<sup>20</sup> Egypt is also an important buyer of French weapons and the two countries have cooperated closely in Libya. With regards to security, France has long approached the MENA region as well as the African Sahel through the prism of the terrorist threat and extremism, an approach that is also explained by domestic politics given France's sizable Muslim minority. This prism explains Paris's policies in Libya, where it has supported the forces of eastern commander General Khalifa Haftar's self-proclaimed war on the GNA and political Islam in the country, as well as France's increased alignment with the UAE and Egypt, actors that have made opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and any form of political Islam a hallmark of their regimes. These viewpoints and alignments also explain the significant erosion of French-Turkish ties, given Ankara's key role in supporting Muslim Brotherhood actors across the MENA since the 2010/11 Arab uprisings.

Such viewpoints have not received much backing from most other European states. Southern Mediterranean states, such as Italy and Spain, have tended to adopt a more nuanced understanding of Turkey's actions and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the MENA. While France tends to see these more accommodating stances as resulting from Italy and Spain's deep economic, trade and energy interests or a fear of migration, different understandings of security and the terrorist threat are also important. These are clearly identifiable in the different approaches adopted by Rome and Paris vis-à-vis the GNA government in Libya and its key external backer Turkey. While Paris has prioritised counter-terrorism, even at the cost of aligning with a new military strongman in Libya, Italy (and Spain as well as Germany) have tended to prioritise migration over terrorism, leading consequently to an urgent need to stabilise the conflict via cooperation with the only UN-recognised government in Libya, the GNA of Tripoli.

With regards to Turkey, France has gradually become convinced that confrontation, rhetorical threats and even sanctions are the best means to contain Turkish moves and lead to a change of direction in Ankara. While other EU member states acknowledge the provocative nature of Turkish moves, they have thus far resisted calls by Paris, Athens and Nicosia to increase punitive measures, believing these to be harmful to the goal of acquiring leverage over Turkey. It is in this context, that France has found itself somewhat isolated within Europe when calling for sanctions on Turkey. While some have noted that Germany and France could well be acting as the 'good cop' and 'bad cop' vis-à-vis Turkey<sup>21</sup>, mixing sticks and carrots in an effort to maximise EU leverage, others have questioned this reading, given the lack of Franco-German coordination when it comes to diplomatic efforts in Libya or the Eastern Mediterranean, perhaps signalling that a struggle of leadership over EU Mediterranean policy may better explain these different French and German approaches.

Although Italy could play a mediating role in the evolving Eastern Mediterranean security complex similar to Germany on account of Rome's good relations with all actors, Italy lacks the resources, political will and reliability to do so. Partially due to internal political instability and a weak coalition government, Rome has tended more toward a balancing role – keeping a low profile with regards to evolving developments in the Mediterranean, cultivating relations and interests with all interested actors while resisting calls to pick sides in these overlapping disputes. The result has been a rather muddled approach to the Eastern Mediterranean, one marked by a number of apparent contradictions but which has ultimately helped preserve Italian neutrality, thus providing Rome with some influence to assist the policies of other lead actors seeking to promote de-escalation and diplomacy in the region.

From the Italian standpoint, Eni's Eastern Mediterranean energy operations<sup>22</sup> are important to diminish European and Italian over-dependence on Russia as a gas supplier, and to provide new avenues for Italian energy diversification and economic returns. Rome therefore supported the effort to develop a cooperative framework between littoral states with the largest discoveries and seek to market liquified natural gas (LNG) through Egypt's terminals, both to Europe and other locations.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, Italy supported the emerging energy triangles between Greece-Israel-Egypt and Israel-Greece-Cyprus<sup>24</sup> and later became a founding member of the EMGF headquartered in Cairo.<sup>25</sup>

These developments would seem to place Italy squarely in the Greek-Cypriot camp and aligned with France on the evolving energy disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Libya however complicated this equation, as both Italy and Turkey are among the most visible and vocal supporters of the GNA in Tripoli, placing Rome at odds with Paris in Libya, a country where Italy enjoys vast energy interests. The joint Italian-Turkish involvement in Libya, coupled with Italy's fear of production losses due to shutdowns in areas that were combat zones between the GNA and rival eastern forces aligned with France, Egypt and the UAE, created important lines of cooperation with Ankara. Add to this the developing energy interests between Turkey and Italy with regards to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline that will carry Caspian basin gas to Europe via Italy (and Greece), a more complete, if complex, picture of Italian-Turkish relations emerges. Thus, while Italy was concerned about Turkish moves, and particularly angered by the November 2019 Turkey-Libya maritime agreement, Rome and Ankara have demonstrated an ability to compartmentalise areas of disagreement without threatening their generally close political and trade relationship.

Italy has been careful to balance its relationship with Turkey against its other interests and commitments, resulting Rome's consistent embracing of EU solidarity with Greece and Cyprus. Italy has joined in EU statements of condemnation of Turkish drilling operation, participated in French-Greek-Cypriot joint naval exercises, and has backed the formalization of the EMGF into an intergovernmental organization in September 2020 – notwithstanding Turkish sensitivities. At the same time however, Italy has also participated in joint military exercises with Turkey in the Mediterranean, both bilaterally and under NATO auspices during 2020, and lines of communication between Rome and Ankara have been particularly active during the height of summer tensions in the Mediterranean. As noted by one Italian researcher, “Italy’s ambiguity is currently epitomised by its dual commitment to both the Turkish-led naval operation Mediterranean Shield and to the Greek-led Quadrilateral Initiative Operation Eunomia [...] but it is difficult to establish whether Italy is backing Turkey or Greece.”<sup>26</sup>

Italy remains one of the most active albeit ambiguous players in the Eastern Mediterranean security complex. Rome has thus far backed the German-led softer approach towards Turkey, resisting French efforts to drag Italy into the camp of countries advocating for punitive measures and a more confrontational stance towards Ankara. This is explained by Italy’s traditional efforts to balance multiple interests and partnerships while tracing a middle line that can keep Rome’s options open. Ultimately, it is linked to Italy’s overall prioritization of Libya over other conflict dossiers in the Mediterranean. For these reasons, Italy has aligned with the efforts of Germany and the High Representative, providing support and coordination to their efforts while working within Europe to expand the grouping of states that support this softer diplomatic approach towards Turkey, also playing an important role in convincing other EU states, including its Mediterranean neighbours Spain and Malta, to support the German effort and avoid escalatory actions or rhetoric that may complicate such diplomacy.

## Conclusion

After years of relative neglect and disinterest, the European Union and its member states have awoken to the significant and multidimensional implications of this evolving security complex in the Eastern Mediterranean. Adopting an approach that seeks to disentangle the various conflict lines in this region, Europe faces an uphill battle in making up for decades of complacency and benign neglect of evolving disputes and relationships in the Mediterranean while re-adjusting to the new international trends of disorderly multipolarity. Europe’s ability to effectively navigate and manage the growing complexity of conflict lines in its near abroad while protecting its interests, values *and* internal cohesion, will be instrumental in defining the EU’s international role and ambition, testing the new European Commission’s ambition to transform the EU into a “geopolitical actor” on the world stage.

In light of the overlapping challenges and conflict lines in the Eastern Mediterranean, no quick fix solutions exist. Rather than embracing comprehensive approaches that seek to address and mitigate all areas of conflict at once, the EU has prioritised the compartmentalisation of conflict lines, seeking to address the three core conflicts separately, while building on the momentum of improvements in one domain to create more conducive environment for progress on others. In this context, the more confrontational stance and impulses of certain EU actors have been contained by a grouping of EU states led by Germany, the European Commission and High Representative which have laboured for a softer, intermediate approach based on dialogue and de-confliction across conflict lines in the region.

Overall, the more time passes and the more Turkey engages in militarised provocations in the absence of talks, the harder it will be for Europe to maintain this softer approach. In this context, the efforts of Germany, the European Commission and others acquire even greater urgency. The approach is correct – prioritising deconfliction and de-escalation as a stepping stone to more comprehensive talks and negotiations across different conflict lines. The *ad hoc* division of labour has also delivered some results. The August 2020 ceasefire in Libya is fragile but holding, providing room for the UN to conduct unity government negotiations under the Libya Political Dialogue Forum. In the realm of Greece-Turkey relations, the resumption of deconfliction talks within NATO, announced on 1 October 2020, is another element of good news, helping de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Having succeeded in pushing the region back from the brink, the real challenge begins: that of translating tactical diplomatic and deconfliction improvements into more lasting agreements and mechanisms for long-term reconciliation. Such efforts will require investments of political capital if progress is to be made. Most importantly they will require the Union to trace common approaches to these disputes, maximising leverage to convince all actors to modify their expectations and engage in win-win compromises.

While Turkey has thus far been spared more extensive sanctions and punitive measures, there are limits to the EU's patience. The more time passes without concrete improvement the higher the chances become that Europe changes course, discarding carrots to embrace a stick when dealing with Ankara. Europe's reluctance to impose sanctions on Turkey should not be read as a sign of complacency or weakness. Rather it should be considered a temporary measure to give time to diplomacy and talks, a bridging solution between two groupings of EU member states that remain divided on what course of action to pursue towards Europe's large and strategic neighbour. Should this window of opportunity be missed and provocative actions continue, then EU solidarity will likely prevail, making it increasingly hard to resist calls for sanctions.

Once the sanctions bridge is crossed, more sanctions can easily follow while it will be harder to council restraint on all sides. The result will be a more fragmented and combustible region, where the potential for conflict increases and with it a further weakening of NATO and perhaps even the European Union itself. To mitigate this worst-case scenario, concrete demonstrations of goodwill and compromise are needed from all sides, starting with Turkey, Greece and Cyprus but extending deep into Europe as well. One can only hope that the recent resumption of dialogue can be the first step towards new and more cooperative mechanisms for this region, auguring more concrete and comprehensive diplomatic efforts that will take shape and continue dominating EU agendas well into 2021 and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> See contributions in this volume by Butter, Çıraklı, Grigoriadis, Ongun, and Tanchum

<sup>2</sup> See contribution in the volume by Alekseenkova.

<sup>3</sup> Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA), "Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas Pipeline – Pre-FEED Studies", *European Commission*, November 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/inea/en/connecting-europe-facility/cef-energy/7.3.1-0025-elcy-s-m-15>

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# Jordan and the Middle Eastern Arab Role in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The Eastern Mediterranean crisis links several volatile regional flashpoints. The most recent confrontations involving maritime boundary disputes and offshore energy development have brought the antagonisms between Turkey and its neighbouring countries of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus to the fore of international attention. When looking at the region as a geopolitical system, it is necessary to remember that of the eleven governments whose territory lies within 100 km of the Eastern Mediterranean's waters, six of them are Arab. Despite the fact that Egypt and Libya are central players, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis is insufficiently viewed from the lens of Arab politics in the region. This study seeks to bring in Arab politics perspective to the Eastern Mediterranean through examining aspects of Jordan's concerns and strategic objectives.

## Jordan-Turkey Convergences

As a central actor in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey features prominently in several of the region's current crises. Turkey's role in the Eastern Mediterranean is also intertwined with its complex relations with its Arab neighbours. The modern Republic of Turkey's relationship with the Arab world originates with the development of Jordanian-Turkish relations dating back to 1937, when Jordan's founding monarch King Abdullah I became the first Arab leader to visit the Turkish Republic since the end of the Ottoman Empire. Following the Hashemite Kingdom's independence, Turkey signed a "Treaty of Friendship"<sup>1</sup> in 1947 and subsequently opened an embassy in Amman.<sup>2</sup>

The flourishing bilateral relations between Ankara and Amman were accompanied by multiple high-level visits, most notable being the 1951 visit of King Abdullah I to Turkey. The royal visit reflected Jordan's emphasis on the convergence of the two countries' interests at both the regional and international levels. HM King Hussein followed the footsteps of his grandfather and maintained good relations with Turkey during the Cold War as both countries enjoyed a broad alignment of views related to anti-Communism, a pro-Western posture, and opposing Iran's hardline Islamic regime and its expanding role in the region. Both countries also shared similar views on the Palestinian issue, as reflected in a joint communique of September 11, 1967, when Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and King Hussein, who visited Turkey at that time, stated that Israel should withdraw from all occupied territories and implement the UN resolutions on Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

During the reign of HM King Abdullah II, Turkey has been led by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) since its 2002 electoral victory. Both countries exchanged visits at the highest levels including then President Abdullah Gül's 2009 visit to Jordan, HM King Abdullah's 2013 visit to Turkey, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 2017 visit to Jordan. These visits reflected the good relations between the two countries – based on common history, shared values, and a broad political alignment that translated into cooperation agreements on lifting visa requirements, establishing direct flights between Amman and Istanbul/Ankara and the signing of the free trade agreement (FTA) in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

The economic repercussions of the Syrian and Iraqi crises similarly impacted both Jordan and Turkey. Jordan and Turkey have suffered from the loss of vital commercial transit routes through Syria and Iraq, compounded by the denial of participation in the reconstruction and export operations of Post-War Iraq in 2000. Moreover, both countries responded to the humanitarian crises in the region and absorbed millions of refugees in their territories at great economic and social cost.

On the security level, both Jordan and Turkey established mechanisms of cooperation in military training that cover such areas as military intelligence, cyber defence, and special forces training. In 2014 both countries conducted many joint activities and reports indicated that hundreds of Jordanian officers received military training in Turkey where both countries were involved in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition in Syria and Iraq. This consensus extended to the Palestinian issue, as Jordan and Turkey have converging concerns related to the status of Jerusalem and human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian Territories. Both countries have voiced their opposition to President Donald Trump's deal of the century which recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and both opposed the Israeli unilateral annexation plans for the West Bank. Ahead of his visit to Amman in 2017, President Erdoğan recognized the important role Jordan plays as a custodian of holy places in Jerusalem and stated that "I want to note the importance we put on the role of Jordan in the protection of the holy places in Jerusalem ... We don't want to experience the same abuse, violation of rights and attacks ... So, the Muslim world should be in solidarity on Jerusalem."<sup>5</sup>

On the public level, President Erdoğan is admired by many Jordanians, especially those who support political Islam, and most Jordanian people rejected the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016. The Jordanian government represented by its ambassador in Turkey Amjad al-Adaileh who also expressed its concern over what he described as unrest and stressed that Turkey's stability is an important factor in the stability and security of the region,<sup>6</sup> pointing to Turkey's positive role in strengthening cooperation between countries and peoples. However, after the failed coup attempt, Turkey completely abandoned its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. No longer emphasizing soft power cooperation, Turkey's new preference for the use of coercive force as its leading foreign policy tool has been a central factor in Amman's recent recalibration of its policy posture toward Ankara.

### **Jordan-Turkey Divergences**

The past decade has also witnessed economic and political trends that have caused a great policy divergence between Jordan and Turkey. On the economic front, Amman terminated its FTA with Ankara in 2018, following complaints from Jordan's commercial sector the agreement favoured the Turkish imports at the expense of the Jordanian exports. A severe trade imbalance resulted from the agreement with Jordan's imports from Turkey having increased by 23% from 2011 to 2017, while Jordan's exports to Turkey increased by only 3%, according to Jordanian data.<sup>7</sup> Starting in January 2019, the Jordanian government attempted to correct this imbalance by imposing custom tariffs on Turkish products.

The most consequential policy divergences between Jordan and Turkey have resulted from the two countries significantly differing positions on the use of political Islam and hard power as foreign policy tools. The unsanctioned leak of minutes from a closed meeting during HM King Abdullah's January 2016 visit to the United States appears to reveal a long-building discomfort

in Amman with the conduct of Turkish foreign policy. Allegedly, during the meeting, the King said that the Turkey's President Erdoğan "believes in a radical Islamic solution to the problems in the region." Addressing European indifference to Turkey's policies, he also reportedly pointed out that "terrorists are going to Europe is part of Turkish policy, and Turkey keeps getting a slap on the hand, but they get off the hook."<sup>8</sup> In January 2020, in his interview with France24, King Abdullah when asked about his views regarding the Turkish troops being sent to Libya, he stated "Well, again, that will only, I think, create more confusion."<sup>9</sup>

Jordan's relationship to its Muslim Brotherhood can only be characterized as cautious and mistrusting since the Brotherhood believes in the greater "Umma" and continually ignored domestic Jordanian issues in favour of supporting Hamas and the Palestinian violence against Israel. Moreover, the Brotherhood have refrained on many occasions from condemning terrorist attacks on Jordanian civilians carried out by terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, casting further aspersions on the group's loyalty to the Hashemite Kingdom. Consequently, the Brotherhood suffered a political decline in Jordan, although it still has deep roots in the country, particularly among Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

To compensate for the loss of its support base, the Brotherhood readopted a populist rhetoric causing fears among Jordanian authorities that the Brotherhood will return to inciting public unrest by exploiting the current difficult living conditions resulting from Jordan's economic crisis. These fears are augmented by Turkey's growing meddling in the region and the close ties between the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Iran and Turkey-backed Hamas Movement in the Gaza Strip.

The concerns over renewed Muslim Brotherhood incitement come during a critical period for the normalization of relations between Israel and some of Jordan's important GCC partners, most notably the UAE. Turkey's harsh response to the normalization of Emirati-Israeli relations has led to concerns about spill over effects in Jordan. Concerns about the impact of Turkey-UAE tensions were amplified by the UAE's strong backing of Greece in the August 2020 maritime stand-off between Turkey and Greece, during which Abu Dhabi sent F-16 fighter jets to Eastern Mediterranean conduct joint exercises with the Hellenic air force.

In July 2020, the Jordanian Court of Cassation (Jordan's Supreme Court) weakened the Muslim Brotherhood's legitimacy when it ruled that the organization "is dissolved by law and no longer has a legal status, for failing to correct its status to be in compliance with Jordanian laws."<sup>10</sup> The Jordanian authorities consider the group to be illegal because it did not obtain a new license under the 2014 law on parties and associations. The court decision was followed by an arrest campaign of Brotherhood members operating inside the country's Teachers Syndicate, whose activity was suspended in August 2020.<sup>11</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood marked its 76th anniversary on May 1, 2020. Technically, the Brotherhood in Jordan dissolved in June 1956 following a reorganization in 1953. However, in Jordan's November 1989 elections,<sup>12</sup> candidates affiliated with the Brotherhood running as independents won 22 of 80 parliamentary seats. Although the Brotherhood did not participate in the prior April protests following a cut in food subsidies, the brotherhood exploited the discontent and the independent candidates it fielded ran under the banner "Islam is the Solution," the slogan of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement. In 1992, Muslim

Brotherhood members formed a political party called the Islamic Action Front (IAF) which became the *de facto* political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordanian politics.

Since the fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood-led government in 2013, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have banned the group. As a result, the hardliners and reformists within Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood affiliate have further divided. The Zamzam Initiative led by the reformists, emerged within the Brotherhood following the 2013 election boycott. Zamzam remains committed to the Brotherhood's Islamist ideals, but opposes the traditionalists' focus on regional issues over Jordanian affairs.

On February 14, 2015, the Brotherhood voted to terminate the memberships of 10 high-ranking members, mostly reformists who wanted to cut ties with the Egyptian Brotherhood. Afterward, 30 Zamzam members filed with Jordan's Ministry of Social Development to form a new charity called the Muslim Brotherhood Society (MBS) using the same logo. The ministry approved the application on March 3rd, effectively recognizing the reformist over the original Muslim Brotherhood Group (MBG). On May 1, 2015, the Jordanian government banned a rally by the MBG to mark the Brotherhood's 70th anniversary. Later in May, the reformist MBS announced intentions to legally pursue control of the Jordanian Brotherhood's assets. MBG leader Hammam Saeed called the new organization a "government conspiracy."

The dissention between the two factions led one Western observer of Jordanian affairs to describe the Jordanian Brotherhood as being "in the throes of civil war."<sup>13</sup>

In December 2015, 400 IAF members resigned, including top leaders of the party, after almost two years of political infighting between the party's hardliner hawks and reformist doves. Consequently, in February 2016, the MBG decided to cut its ties with the international Muslim Brotherhood movement. While many interpreted this decision as the MBG's acknowledgement that the larger movement was a liability, the MBG leadership claimed it was part of reform efforts to prepare the IAF to compete in the then upcoming 2016 elections.

Despite the government's recognition of the reformist MBS over the original MBG, the MBG has continued to have political success. In Jordan's September 2016 parliamentary elections, the MBG's IAF won 10 seats while the MBS won none. In August 2017 local elections, the IAF-affiliated Alliance for Reform coalition won 41 out of 88 municipal council seats across the country, as well as three mayoral races. This win raised a red flag for the Jordanian government since it indicated that the IAF's intention to build a broad base of support in future elections. Assisted by Qatar's and Turkey's intervention, the hardliner and reformist currents have merged again.

### **Jordanian-Egyptian-Iraqi Trilateral Cooperation in a 'New Levant'**

In terms of the Eastern Mediterranean, these domestic concerns and their relation to regional actors have proven to be decisive drivers in shaping Jordan's foreign policy. The Jordanian case forms part of a larger trend in which Arab governments are seeking effective multilateral mechanisms that will protect their sovereignty from outside interference. Jordan's current policy posture is best illustrated by the August 25, 2020 trilateral summit in Amman between Jordan's King Abdullah, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.<sup>14</sup> The third summit of its kind in seventeen months, Jordan's participation is viewed

as a response to shifting regional geopolitical dynamics arising from the heightened tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the UAE-Israel accords. In his opening statement, Jordan's king highlighted the great importance of the meeting "in light of the current extraordinary conditions in the region and the world."<sup>15</sup> King Abdullah emphasized the importance of close coordination and joint action to cope with the threats posed by rapidly changing regional developments and foreign attempts to meddle in internal affairs of Arab states. Jordanian analysts understand King Abdullah's reference to foreign meddling as pointing to Turkey's and Iran's respective military involvement in both Iraq and Syria.

For Iraq, Turkish incursions in Iraqi Kurdistan in violation of previous understandings between Turkey and Iraq have strained ties and put pressure on the Iraqi government to respond. More critically, President Kadhimi is facing challenges to stem Iran's political and military influence in Iraq. His immediate task is to disarm pro-Iranian militias that threaten to turn the country into an arena for a U.S.-Iran showdown.

Concurrently, Turkey's military involvement in Libya and its attempt to expand its maritime sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean has heightened tensions between Turkey and Egypt, whose roots go back to events between 2011-2013 when Turkey's President Erdoğan was the closest international ally to the Muslim Brotherhood-led government under Mohamed Morsi who was removed from power by al-Sisi. Egypt perceives Turkey's support of the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli as a threat to its own national security. Turkey has sent mercenaries, military advisers, and considerable military assets to back the GNA in its fight against renegade forces led by General Khalifa Haftar who is in control of eastern Libya, a region that borders Egypt and includes the strategically important oil infrastructure. Now Turkey has a large air force presence at Libya's al-Watayah air base and is developing its own naval base in the GNA coastal stronghold of Misrata.

In addition, President al-Sisi is worried about Turkey's attempts to encroach on territorial waters in the East Mediterranean. Adding to Egypt's challenge is the failure to reach an agreement with Ethiopia over the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Cairo has shown increasing concern over Ankara's deepening relationship with Addis Ababa and Turkey's military base in neighbouring Somalia.

Jordan too finds itself in a weak position vis-a-vis the two-state solution which was stressed in the summit as the king went on to say that the Palestinian cause remains the core issue in the region. Jordan continues to call for a two-state solution that ends the Israeli occupation and leads to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 lines. Both the Egyptian and Iraqi leaders reaffirmed their support for the Jordanian position.

The three countries face deep economic challenges and their leaders believe that Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq can pool their resources and expertise to build a common economic platform in areas of labor exchange, investments, and expanding consumer markets. Immediately prior to the Amman summit, Iraqi Prime Minister visited the United States and outlined his vision for a "new Levant" with freer flows of capital and technology.<sup>16</sup> While term *New Levant* was not used at the summit, the trilateral meeting is pursuing the goal of defining a regional agenda that reflects Arab Middle Eastern concerns in the face of rising Turkish and Iranian power as well as the Arab Gulf states' bid to lead the Arab world.<sup>17</sup>

The Jordan-Egypt-Iraq trilateral could influence the framework of multi-lateral cooperation across the Eastern Mediterranean as both Egypt and Jordan have their own respective trilateral dialogues with Greece and Cyprus. Four years after the first Egypt-Greece-Cyprus summit, Jordan participated in its first trilateral summit with Greece and Cyprus. The January 2018 summit hosted in Cyprus established a foundation for cooperation between Amman, Athens, and Nicosia at various levels to promote peace, security and stability in the region. The trilateral dialogue has sought out practical ways to promote economic cooperation in various sectors, including an exploration of how to use Jordan's Aqaba port on the Red Sea to create a commercial corridor to Africa.

The trilateral dialogue helps Jordan to promote its relations with the EU through the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as promoting Jordan's interests concerning with the Middle East peace process, conditions in Syria and Iraq, and refugee and migration crises. The first summit also tackled the Palestinian issue and Jerusalem, as well as regional crises and international efforts in the war against terrorism within a holistic approach.<sup>18</sup> The summit was followed by a meeting of the three countries' parliament speakers in which they called for a resumption of negotiations on the Cyprus problem based on existing international resolutions that affirm the sovereignty, independence and security of the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the trilateral meeting highlighted its supporting for the efforts of King Abdullah, as the custodian over Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, to protect the sanctuaries and maintain their legal status quo."<sup>20</sup> Agreeing to two subsequent meetings, the parliamentary speakers addressed means to enhance ongoing cooperation in the energy, tourism, educational and cultural fields.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

Jordan anticipates with caution numerous sources of insecurity that threaten to escalate and put its national and regional stability at risk. From a Jordanian perspective, regional dynamics that need to be urgently addressed include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the collapse of failed states, the increase of terrorist activities, the proliferation of all types of weapons, energy security, environmental degradation and the ever-increasing state of economic crisis. Jordan's policy orientation toward the Eastern Mediterranean derives from this wider context.

In response to these challenges, Jordan seeks to develop partnerships in the Eastern Mediterranean that contribute to the reduction of tensions across the region. For Jordan, such partnerships require a reciprocal sensitivity by each side to the other's domestic interests. From a Jordanian point of view, the development of mechanisms for deconfliction and genuine confidence-building in the Eastern Mediterranean require that regional cooperation reflects the basic concerns of the Middle Eastern Arab states.

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## Key Judgements

MICHAËL TANCHUM, ERCAN ÇITLIOĞLU, WALTER GLOS

- **Strategic Urgency to resolve Eastern Mediterranean conflicts individually but concurrently**  
De-escalation and stabilization efforts must disentangle the Cyprus problem, the Turkey-Greece maritime boundary dispute, and the Libya conflict, – compartmentalizing the conflict zones but working on solutions in each concurrently. Engaging in concurrent processes, even if each process does not proceed at the same pace, prevents grievances in one conflict zone from being used to sabotage progress in one of the other zones. Further, the momentum produced by positive results in one domain can be leveraged to create a more conducive environment for progress in the other domains.
- **Cyprus Problem: Parameters for joint development of Cyprus' natural gas resources and revenue-sharing should be outlined as an incentive for renewed negotiations**  
Confidence in the Cyprus negotiating process needs to be restored. Outlining some parameters for joint development of Cyprus' natural gas resources and revenue-sharing could create a basis whereby Turkish Cypriots can be assured that the Greek Cypriot side is amenable to more parity in the negotiating process and in the final outcome.
- **Turkey-Greece Maritime Boundary Dispute: Negotiations based on some form of an adjudication process rooted in law and *realpolitik***  
Neither Turkey nor Greece will receive their maximal boundary demands under any form adjudication by a tribunal of international maritime law – the likely outcome of such adjudication would invalidate the use of some small Greek islands near Turkey's mainland to be used for the delineation of maritime boundaries while upholding the use of larger islands and more distant islands. Negotiations can include some formal adjudication acceptable to both sides or simply negotiations that take their starting point as the likely outcome of such adjudication. Third parties competent in maritime law and perceived as even-handed by both the Turkish and Greek sides should facilitate the process that is rooted in legal principle and sufficiently flexible to accommodate and incentivize *realpolitik*.
- **Libya Conflict: Incentivize outside actors by ensuring some of their basic economic concerns are accommodated**  
The Libya Political Dialogue Forum requires the support of the main foreign actors that have intervened in Libya as a unity government will entail Libyan rivals, backed by those opposing foreign actors, working constructively in one government. Turkey, Egypt, Italy, France, among others, can be incentivized to support the Libyan elections, the selection of competent ministry officials, and the overall efficient functioning of a unity government by being provided some form of assurance about the accommodation of their own interests in construction contracts and participating in other aspects of the economy of a reconstructed Libya.
- **Enhance mechanisms for NATO-EU cooperation in the Mediterranean basin**  
The Eastern Mediterranean crisis calls for a much closer cooperation between NATO and the EU to create a synergy between their respective instruments of power. This is an indispensable strategic imperative for the nations of Europe, including for Turkey. NATO has

been very successful in calming tensions and played a helpful role in preventing escalation between allies. Coordination should leverage the EU's constructive capabilities that are outside of NATO's mandate. The development and strengthening of close partnerships with like-minded non-European nations should be part of this process.

- **Enhance coordination between NATO-EU cooperation and the Union for the Mediterranean**  
The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) should be brought into coordination with joint NATO-EU cooperation. The UfM can play a constructive role by providing meaningful participation of the Arab states of the southern and eastern rims of the Mediterranean basin.

- **Recognize Russia's several cross-cutting interests and offer economic incentives where possible**  
Russia has several cross-cutting interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and seeks to maintain its relations with all the countries in the region. Russia's main concern is the reconstruction of Syria and to increase its energy and economic involvement with Eastern Mediterranean countries. These factors offer opportunities to incentivize constructive cooperation through joint commercial ventures.

