



NEAR EAST INSTITUTE



NEAR EAST BULLETIN

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR: INTRODUCING THE NEAR EAST BULLETIN

Dear Readers,

We are delighted to introduce the very first issue of the Near East Institute's Policy Brief Series: the Near East Bulletin. The new quarterly series will strive to uphold the Institute's mission of advancing a scientific and dispassionate understanding of all issues that are of relevance to Cyprus and the wider Near East region with an equally wide scope to include a variety of topics and formats, including guest contributions and interviews. Each Bulletin will feature a selection of recent work on a policy-relevant theme by Institute researchers and guest contributors intended for academics, policy-makers and general audience alike.

The current selection of publications emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic which has exposed vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems that are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic. What this means for global cooperation remains uncertain. While rising geostrategic competition between the United States (US) and China (and different political systems) creates barriers to cooperation, the World Health Organisation (WHO) faces



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problems of a limited mandate, funding, and authority. Debates over how to respond to the pandemic and its economic fallout have opened up a rift between Northern and Southern European Union (EU) member states, reminiscent of debates over the 2010s sovereign debt crisis.

While the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant a brief pause in the fast-paced energy politics of the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's first drillship, the Fatih, is set to continue operations in the Black Sea and make its first drilling project in July, while the country's third drillship, the Kanuni, is said to be ready to start its operations following a relaxation on measures against the pandemic. This comes at a time when the effect of the virus has caused a sudden global economic downturn and a corresponding fall in global oil prices. The impact of COVID-19, coupled with low oil prices, has affected exploration and drilling activities on the part of global oil companies and resulted in revisions or temporary suspensions to these programs, including those in the Eastern Mediterranean.



ExxonMobil shelved its plans to drill off the coast of Cyprus as of April 13 in response to the outbreak and the subsequent chaos. The drilling programs of French-Italian consortium, Total and ENI, were also postponed on the three wells planned for 2020 and six wells planned for the following two years. In a similar way, Italy's ENI is set to focus on ongoing projects and mainly upstream activities. The impact of Turkey's active policy and increased presence in the region coupled with the subsiding of interest in the region on the part of the global energy players may have serious ramifications for the geopolitical dynamic of the region and beyond.

The current collection of policy briefs written by the Near East Institute experts focus on each of these issues in turn, exploring how Turkey's engagement is changing regional energy

landscapes and balances of power in the region (Sait Akşit), what the political and energy developments mean for the ongoing conflicts in the region and in particular, Cyprus (Nur Köprülü), what the prospects are for further escalation of the tensions (Assel Tutumlu) and whether international law provide us with answers or indeed, a solution (Erdi Şafak). The issue also includes a guest contribution, written by Nimrod Goren from Mitvim — the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, which outlines Israel's positioning within the East Med energy strata, and highlights several priority measures to accompany both the immediate diplomatic/territorial disputes and longer-term potential exploitation of offshore resources.

We look forward to your contributions to the Bulletin and have every expectation that it will soon be among the most influential outputs of its kind for academics and policy-makers alike.

EAST MED ENERGY:

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CYPRUS

The Eastern Mediterranean (East Med) has recently begun to appear as a new sub-region within the conflict-driven Middle East. No doubt, recent gas discoveries have been the key trigger in bringing the region onto the political agendas and the subsequent power struggle among the major actors that have coastal access.

In terms of the size of the reserves, their vast potential is yet to be fully evaluated. The proven reserves that have been found offshore in Israel's Tamar and Leviathan fields in 2009 and 2010 amount to an estimated capacity of 282 bcm and 621 bcm of gas respectively; and the Aphrodite field in Cyprus is said to hold an estimated capacity of 128 bcm. The huge Zohr field that was discovered in 2015 off the coast of Egypt that stands for the largest capacity found in the same geological basin until now amounts to an estimated 845 bcm.

Yet, the Eastern Mediterranean as a region is characterised by great volatility much like the wider Middle East which greatly impacts its energy potential. In fact, the latter has so far only increased the prospects for conflict as displayed in the case of Cyprus. Indeed, the gas discoveries in Cyprus both in 2011 and in 2018 did not only exacerbate the existing rivalry in the region, but also made the settlement of the Cyprus Problem to be too susceptible to the ups and downs within heated debates on maritime delimitation, thus



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aggravating the progress for reunification talks instead of reducing the threat perceptions among the major parties to the dispute; i.e. among Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots; Greek Cypriots and Turkey as well as among Turkey and Greece.

“Middle Easternization” of the Cyprus problem

The political and economic geography of the region surrounding Cyprus encompasses a range of actors and complex dynamics. The ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent outbreak of the war in Syria — which has gone beyond the limits of Arab Spring — has led to a huge influx of Syrian refugees migrating primarily to neighbouring countries, particularly Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Today, half of the total ‘pre-war’ population of Syria is either out of the country or displaced within the country which now amounts to a human security crisis in the region.

Most notably perhaps, another important upshot of the 2011 Arab uprisings has been the restructuring of power in the Middle East which is

intimately related to the energy politics of the East Med that revolve around the hydrocarbon reserves in the region. The fall of Ikhwan's leader Muhammad Mursi through a coup in July 2013 and the ascendancy of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as the new president of Egypt meant a rapid deterioration of Turkey's relations with Egypt. Turkey's relations with another regional power, Israel, also continue to suffer from the fallout that occurred in 2009 when a sharp exchange took place between the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Israeli President Simon Peres at the World Economic Summit at Davos, only to be followed by the Mavi Marmara flotilla crisis in 2010.

The coinciding 'anti-normalization' of relations between Turkey-Egypt and Turkey-Israel has since been evaluated as a step towards isolating Turkey from regional alignments and initiatives aimed at the exploration and future exploitation of the gas resources. To this effect, (de facto Greek-Cypriot) Cyprus' appetite for tripartite summits and alliances that were designed exclusively to exclude Turkey have only served to agitate Turkey and exacerbate the tensions between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities while damaging the prospects for a solution to the Cyprus problem.

For any realistic prospects of success, the Greek Cypriot leadership must show genuine will that it is ready to cooperate. In 2016, the Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades declared that "energy cooperation in the region can transform the Eastern Mediterranean into a pillar of stability, security and peace and be a decisive factor in achieving energy security for the EU".¹ But energy is yet to become a platform of cooperation let alone pave the way for a solution to the Cyprus problem. Instead, the hydrocarbon conflict, in the case of Cyprus, has only initiated a new episode in the long-raging debates over governance and



power-sharing with no tangible mechanisms to ensure the rights of the Turkish Cypriots will be given full consideration, which in turn, has made it near impossible to achieve an equitable solution with Turkey.

The main question in the current saga involving Turkey and Cyprus thus revolves around the future spill-over effects of Turkey's exclusion from the East Med hydrocarbon gateways. Fortunately, Ankara's position in coping with the issue has so far focused on calling for a multilateral platform that would bring all the parties to the same table, rather than working on a unilateral or bilateral basis that exclude certain countries.

The Hydrocarbon issue has complicated an already complex region

The dramatic collapse of the Cyprus peace talks held under the United Nations (UN) auspices in the summer of 2017 has not only disappointed Turkish Cypriots, but also the international community. Following the collapse of the talks in Crans Montana, Turkey decided to play a more assertive role in the so-called 'energy bonanza'



and signed a maritime deal in December 2019 with the UN-backed government in Libya. Greece and Cyprus moved in quickly and signed a trilateral agreement ten days later, envisaging a pipeline that could supply Europe with 4 percent of its annual gas demands through connecting Israel's offshore fields with Europe. Meanwhile, Assistant to United States (US) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francis R. Fannon in his recent visit to Cyprus reiterated the “incredibly important role” of Cyprus to play in “developing energy supplies in the eastern Mediterranean that [...] could help lessen Europe’s dependence on Russian gas”.²

¹ “Energy: a shaping factor for regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean?”, Directorate General for External Policies, June 2017 - PE578.044, available online at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578044/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578044_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578044/EXPO_STU(2017)578044_EN.pdf) [Last accessed: 12 May 2020].

² Turkish Minute (2020), “US backs Cyprus in east Mediterranean energy duel with Turkey: Report”, 5 February. Available online at: <https://www.turkishminute.com/2020/02/05/us-backs-cyprus-in-east-mediterranean-energy-duel-with-turkey-report/> [Last accessed: 12 May 2020].

However, one needs to be pragmatic regarding these developments. Maritime deals and any realistic prospects of gas exploitation will both require (geo)political circumstances that are conducive to cooperation and collaboration. It is likely that the hydrocarbon issue together with the broader issue of maritime delimitation will remain on local and regional agendas for some time, due not only to the political considerations of the littoral states but also the involvement of actors from outside the region, including the US, the European Union (EU) and the energy companies. Pragmatism and soberness is thus needed to avert a further deterioration of relations among the major regional actors and strike an inclusive balance on a ‘win-win’ principle for all parties.

It is in this context that the recent Turkish/Turkish-Cypriot proposal to set up a joint energy committee³, should be seen not as a ‘lost opportunity’ but an ‘on-the-table’ game-changer that would address tensions and function as a catalyst in finding a viable solution to the Cyprus problem that holds the key for bringing about such a conducive atmosphere.

Two broad conclusions can be drawn from these discussions. First, energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region reflect the changing nature of Turkey’s relationship with its neighbours in the post-Arab Spring era and reveals the very fact that hydrocarbon conflicts have added new dimensions onto existing conflicts. Second, and rather paradoxically, the gas discoveries that exacerbate the existing conflicts also offer the way-forward: to resolve political disputes to allow all parties from realising its full potential. For Cyprus, this means the settling of the dispute that would pave the way not only for exploiting the natural riches for the benefit of the people of Cyprus, as a whole, but also for genuine cooperation and stability in the region.

EAST MED IN 2020:

TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD

The subsequent statements by ExxonMobil in early April and ENI and Total in early May to put their programmes on hold following the slump in the demand and drop in the prices of oil due to the pandemic and the Saudi-Russian rift seem to have altered the momentum in the struggle for power in the Eastern Mediterranean (East Med). Will this lead to a major change in the fortunes of the East Med gas? Will the changes drive the parties towards overcoming their differences? For this there needs to be a strong will towards concrete negotiations on the Cyprus issue.

Rather than being a catalyst for a solution to the Cyprus issue, the energy resources around the island have turned out to be a game-changer in a negative sense intensifying the struggle for power and increasing tension among the actors across the East Med. This was in congruence with the international dynamics: in the 2010s, states increasingly considered political and strategic stakes much higher and economic nationalism became the driving policy approach. The Arab uprisings exacerbated the tendency towards fragmentation and polarization leading to recurrent bilateral/multilateral crisis in the region. These included the bilateral crisis between Turkey-Israel and Turkey-Egypt as well as the competitive approach of the states of wider region



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towards the conflicts in Syria and in Libya.

Greece and the 'Republic of Cyprus' (RoC, controlled de facto by the Greek Cypriots) built upon Turkey's deteriorating relations and perceived 'loneliness' in the region to enhance their relations. Here, one may say that the RoC was internationalizing the Cyprus issue to pressurize Turkey by means of energy. In December 2010 RoC reached an agreement with Israel on the delimitation of its exclusive economic zone following the Mavi Marmara flotilla crisis and subsequently started the drilling process in 2011 despite Turkish objections. This started of a process that expanded respectively in 2013 and

1 Elias Hazou (2020), 'Coronavirus: Minister confirms long delay in Cyprus' gas drilling', Cyprus Mail, 13 April. Available online at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/04/13/coronavirus-minister-confirms-long-delay-in-cyprus-gas-drilling/>; Ebru Şengül Cevrioğlu (2020), 'Kovid-19 Doğu Akdeniz'deki dengeleri Türkiye lehine çevirdi' [Covid turns tables in the East Med in favour of Turkey], Anadolu Ajansı, 1 May. Available online at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/kovid-19-dogu-akdenizdeki-dengeleri-turkiye-lehine-cevirdi/1825309> [Last Accessed: 12.05.2020].

Muhammet İkbâl Arslan (2020), 'ENI ve Total şirketleri, Rumların sözde münhasır ekonomik bölgesindeki sondaj çalışmalarını erteledi' [ENI and Total postpones drilling in the so-called Greek Cypriot EEZ], Anadolu Ajansı, 5 May. Available online at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/eni-ve-total-sirketleri-rumların-sozde-munhasir-ekonomik-bolgesindeki-sondaj-calismalarini-erteledi/1829255>.

2014 with exploration licenses granted to international oil companies and the signing of trilateral memorandums of understanding between Greece-Cyprus-Israel and Greece-Cyprus-Egypt. The Greek Cypriot exploration attempts were further enhanced through licencing of drilling rights to international oil companies such as ENI, Total, ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum in April 2017. The next steps intended to deepen the connection among the countries involved, aiming to move from partnerships of convenience towards more established alliances on issues beyond the East Med gas including the development of relations 'on all fronts' with Saudi Arabia among others.

Turkey's interpretation of the Greek and Greek Cypriot policy approaches as attempts to corner Turkey and render her a passive actor in the region led Turkey to redefine her engagement with the East Med. An important turning point regarding Turkey's approach on the hydrocarbons was to send, in April 2017, the Barbaros seismic vessel to areas with overlapping claims. Turkey gave a stronger signal that it would follow a more assertive approach and implement preventive measures countering such acts that might endanger rights of Turkey and those of Turkish Cypriots entitled to equal rights and co-ownership of the resources on and offshore the island. This was followed with the intervention of Turkish navy vessels of the drilling activities of ENI, within areas of overlapping claims in February 2018. An important aspect of this process was the diplomatic efforts that were pursued with the ENI and Foreign Ministry officials in Italy, also involving Turkish Cypriot officials. The start of the drilling process in May 2019 in disputed areas was perhaps the most assertive policy choice from Ankara. The move to sign a memorandum with Libya, in November 2019, on the delimitation

of the maritime jurisdiction areas between the two states further tilted the balance in the East Med rivalry. Seeing Turkey as the problematic actor here however, as the Greek and Greek Cypriot political elites often do, would be misleading.

The failure of the Cyprus negotiations in Crans-Montana which brought the process on the brink of a settlement was, for the Turkish Cypriots, the result of unwavering Greek Cypriot approach on power sharing and political equality. The outright rejection by the Greek Cypriot political leaders of the Turkish Cypriot proposal in July 2019 to establish a joint committee to address tensions on the subject of hydrocarbons was yet another stride that strengthened the Turkish Cypriot belief that the Greek Cypriot side was not willing to accept the equal rights of the Turkish Cypriots.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, its economic ramifications, and the subsequent uncertainty in the demand for energy presents various puzzles for border disputes and the exploration of the gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. A prolonged global economic crisis and lower levels of demand for energy resources may put the future market possibilities of the East Med gas and the future of East Med pipeline in jeopardy. However, if one considers the East Med from a geostrategic perspective, it is unreasonable to expect a total loss of interest on the part of the major powers towards the region, despite the high unit cost of gas. In this context, the economic links and networks Ankara has developed in the region, despite political obstacles, offer several opportunities and alternative, more feasible

scenarios including the possibility of a pipeline between Turkey and Israel which the two sides have not ruled out.

A major breakthrough in the short-term regarding Cyprus and the wider energy plans is unlikely however given the short-termism and the political timeline that awaits the island in terms of the forthcoming October 2020 presidential elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Cyprus in 2021. The outcome of the two however may help in bringing up a new dialogue.



EAST MED ENERGY POLITICS:

A BRIEF FORECAST FOR 2020

The Eastern Mediterranean as a region in general and an energy region in particular is characterized by great volatility and geopolitical instability. Recent hydrocarbon discoveries have only added a new twist onto this complex terrain and it is thus possible to see a certain escalation of tensions that may only be capped by the limits of domestic economic stability among the key external players, Russia, Turkey and Greece amidst the ongoing pandemic. Key players, such as Russia and Turkey that have been excluded from the talks on border delineation both adopted a more assertive stance in the region. Greece together with the (de facto Greek Cypriot) Republic of Cyprus, which received the backing of the European Union (EU) in their positions, have also been further instigating conflict potential. Should economic growth and revenue of key external players deteriorate, we may see a temporary transition to a frozen conflict, which will resume under more favorable economic circumstances. Particularly, with Russia under sanctions and low revenues from oil exports, and Turkey facing shortages of foreign exchange, assertive foreign policy may be mediated by the desire of these regimes to preserve much needed cash for rainy days.

With this said, it is important to briefly outline the positions of these three key players more attentively in order to forecast the expected outcomes. First, both Russia and Turkey feel that the recent discoveries of



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natural gas in Eastern Mediterranean represent a threat to their national interests.

Russian key interest in the region is anchored on its desire to retain control over natural gas delivery to Europe. In doing so it has become a key player in the Middle East assisting Syrian regime through a trilateral coalition with Turkey and Iran. Despite sanctions, Russian government is taking high risks since it sees its economic interests as a matter of national security. With Putin, who wrote his dissertation on oil and gas, energy resources act as instruments for the revival of Great Power status, which is manifested in the Russian expansion of the zones of influence. It is not only Central Asia, but the Middle East, as well as Southeast Europe and Africa that are under its ambitious action plan. At present, Russia controls nearly 30 percent of all natural gas consumed in Europe with some countries being completely dependent on it. To keep control, Russia has been engaged in several international projects to prevent other parties from entering strategic markets, including Nord Stream 2 and Turkstream pipelines. Both pipelines circumvent Ukraine with which Russia has been engaged in bitter dispute not only in terms of Crimea and the Donbass but also over pricing and volumes of distribution. Nord Stream 2 delivers natural gas to Europe via the Baltics and the Turkstream passes through Serbia, Bulgaria and Turkey. Although the first pipeline suffered delays and will be

operational in 2021, the second pipeline had a rather impressive official opening in January 2020. With large discoveries of natural gas in Eastern Mediterranean, Russia is keen on ensuring that Europe remains under its control by cooperating with Iran, a country that prevents Israel from having a safe and unrestricted access to the sea. In addition, it also cooperates with Turkey, which undermines any pipeline project that excludes its preferences and positions.

Indeed, Turkey, which is another key actor that has sought to defend its national interests, has seen itself excluded from various initiatives and maritime delineation talks. Cyprus, Israel, and Greece have agreed on their maritime borders in 2003, but borders with Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Libya and Egypt have not been settled. As a result, Turkey signed an agreement with Libya's internationally-recognized government defining its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without recognizing the right of Greek islands to maintain their exclusivity. In return, Greece severed diplomatic ties with Libya and obtained support from the EU. Such conflictual attitudes have already added onto the existing tensions in the region with ships being driven by navy vessels, and arrest warrants being issued for crews on allegations of illegal drilling in a 'tit-for-tat' diplomacy.

Such building up of tensions will continue and it is likely that the situation will remain unstable and uncertain. Borders will remain disputed, but three countries, Israel, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus will try to begin exploration within their sectors in undisputed zones as it was done in the Caspian. For their part, Russia, Turkey and TRNC will try to prevent exploration, but with no standing dispute on those parts of the basin, it will be difficult for them to block exploration and extraction activities. In the disputed areas however, Russia, Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) will be feverishly guarding their claims and Russia in particular, will

continue to play geopolitical chess behind the scenes to prevent rival gas supplies reaching Europe. There is very little that the other states can do about containing such diplomatic posturing and geostrategic skirmishes. United States (US) is not interested in engaging in the Middle East and is actively involved in rolling its participation from the security arrangements. With the discovery of the synthetic oil, the US is also no longer sees stability of oil supply in international market as an important public good that this country needs to provide. The EU also does not have much capacity to offset a potential aggression, since it is pre-occupied with domestic problems and has long lost leverage over Turkey by unconditionally siding with Greece and the RoC.

If the economic conditions turn sour amidst the ongoing pandemic however, it is possible to predict a more cautious diplomacy not only from Moscow or Ankara but from all regional actors. Should this be the case, and with very little appetite on the part of the energy companies in view of the volatility in petrol prices, gas fields that are located in the disputed areas will probably stay dormant and frozen until amicable cooperative arrangements can be made and/or until key actors recover domestic capacity to conduct a fully-assertive foreign policy in this region.



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND THE RIGHTS OF THE REGIONAL ACTORS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL LAW PERSPECTIVE

Recent hydrocarbon discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean is enticing not only the regional actors but also the global players. Yet, the ongoing disputes in the region have been complicated further with the emerging of an 'energy crisis' that is indicative of a change in the balance of power. The beginning of the drilling by the de facto Greek Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and the ensuing reaction from Turkey lies at the heart of the current crisis. And if not managed properly, it carries the potential to spill beyond the confines of the region onto the global geostrategic landscape.

Greek Cyprus – Turkey Energy Dispute: How did it start?

The ongoing dispute between Turkey and the RoC can be traced back to 2007 when the latter signed a deal with Lebanon for the "delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone" (EEZ). Similar accords were signed with Egypt (2003) and Israel (2010) which has been divided into 13 exploration



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blocks. In reaction to the deal with Lebanon and the issuing of exploration licenses by the Greek Cypriot authorities, Turkey then moved to dispatch its navy ships, conducted its own seismic studies and acquired a drilling ship Fatih, named after Istanbul's conqueror Ottoman Sultan Fatih Sultan Mehmet, which began drilling off Cyprus's west coast late last year, escorted by a frigate.

Delimitation of the Maritime Boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Legal Perspective

The law of the sea, in its essence, divides the seas into zones and specifies the rights and duties of states and ships flying their flags in those zones. The legal criteria developed for shelf delimitation focus on geological and geographical factors, while the criteria relevant to the exclusive economic zone, although not very well developed, may be regarded as also encompassing historic usage and economic considerations. Cooperation on maritime issues by States nonetheless, in the delimitation of maritime boundaries, is very

important in contributing to the maintenance of peace, security and economic well-being for all the nations of the world. It is clear that delimitation by agreement remains the primary rule of international law. The negotiating process is very important for achieving agreement. The delimitation process must be effected by agreement between parties on the basis of international law, as it is recognised by 1982 Law of the Sea (LOS) Convention. Also the fundamental procedural principle of general application forming part of the International Court Justice's doctrine, and as indicated in 1982 LOS Convention, is the principle of effecting maritime boundary delimitation by agreement. The principle constitutes a special application of the general principle of peaceful settlement of international disputes and puts emphasis on a State obligation to negotiate in good faith with a view to conclude agreement.

The fundamental role of maritime delimitation law in terms of hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation activities is aptly illustrated in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, where the regional states sought to define their maritime boundaries prior to carrying out oil and gas operations without hindrance. Yet an important shortcoming of the diplomatic process that has established a form of intra-regional cooperation is the ongoing dispute over regional maritime boundaries. Of the 13 maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, 11 of them remain unresolved or disputed.

From the Turkish/Turkish Cypriot perspective which disputes some of those boundaries, RoC is to blame for ramping up the tensions in the region. For Ankara, the Greek Cypriot administration is

trying to usurp Turkey's territorial rights by unilaterally declaring an exclusive economic zone and granting licenses to international energy firms without due consideration of the rights of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots on the island. In the same vein, it is argued that Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) are allowed to reserve (both ab inito and ipso facto) and exercise their rights in the region. According to the law, national territories have a continental shelf up to 200 miles while the islands have territorial waters extending up to 14 miles. The disputed 6th Block, for instance, falls within the limits of Turkey's 200-mile continental shelf.

A further spin is the fact that Turkey does not have diplomatic relations with the Greek-Cypriot controlled RoC and does not recognize Cyprus's economic exclusion zone. Accordingly, it refutes Greek-Cypriot claims to exclusive sovereignty, and asserts that such sovereignty is subject to negotiation in the Cyprus peace talks, while pointing to its own status as guarantor of the 1960 treaty agreement to protect the rights of Turkish Cypriots. For Turkish Cypriots too, the Greek Cypriot side is acting in "complete disregard of the Turkish Cypriot people" after it dismissed a plan to establish a joint committee on hydrocarbons that would turn the issue "from an area of tension and conflict" into one of "efficient cooperation".

Peaceful resolution through International Law?

In view of the need in the region for a workable and just resolution of equitable delimitations, and the potential for conflict in its absence, the United Nations (UN) can be thought as a pathway to this achievement. Article 3 of the relevant chapter (VI)



under the UN Convention deals with the resolution of disputes and allows the Security Council to intervene:

i. The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.

ii. The Security Council shall, when it deems necessary, call upon the parties to settle their dispute by such means.

While the ongoing Cyprus Problem renders the prospects of the parties (Turkey and the RoC) negotiating let alone talking directly with each

other unlikely, an inclusive and equitable resolution of such disputes is of urgent importance if the Eastern Mediterranean is to successfully realize its projects, attract further investment, and built a long-lasting model of regional cooperation. In this regard, the best outcome would be a deal that would end the Cyprus problem, whatever that deal may be. Exclusion, unilateral decision-making, and firebrand rhetoric will only maintain, if not intensify, the status quo.



THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:

A NEW DIPLOMATIC ARENA FOR ISRAEL

For decades, Israelis tended to perceive themselves as living in a hostile region and as being doomed for isolation in their neighborhood. The changing realities between Israel and Arab countries, which included increased acceptance, agreements and cooperation, have not yet altered this basic mindset. Therefore, once the Eastern Mediterranean began to emerge as a distinct sub-region to which Israel could not only belong, but in which it can also play a leading role, it was warmly embraced by the Israeli policy elite.

Israel's diplomatic emphasis on the Eastern Mediterranean evolved throughout the 2010s based on natural gas findings in Israel's economic waters and growing tensions with Turkey. Israel cooperated with Greece and Cyprus to establish a new trilateral alliance, which was in line with similar triangular alliances the Hellenic countries were developing (e.g. with Egypt). This alliance became increasingly visible, with the leaders of Israel, Greece and Cyprus setting the tone by conducting multiple summits. Other ministers, government agencies and non-governmental organizations followed suit, and managed to inject significant and diverse content into the emerging alliance. Over the time, the US also stepped in and began to participate in Israel-Greece-Cyprus meetings.



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The alliance was presented to the public in a positive light. A special logo was designed, which included a motto emphasizing the democratic natures of the three countries. The EU seemed to welcome this new alliance, and was willing to help fund the feasibility study of the ambitious East Med pipeline project (aimed at exporting gas from Israel, through Cyprus, to Europe). The cooperation around natural gas brought additional countries into the picture, leading to the establishment in Cairo of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in early 2019. The EMGF, which in early 2020 is evolving into a recognized international organization, enables Israel to be part of a regional mechanism with a unique composition of Arab and European states. Apart from Israel, its members include the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, Italy, Cyprus and Greece. Recently, France also asked to join, while the US, EU and World Bank serve as observers. Such an organization provides Israel with both diplomatic and economic opportunities.

Israel can benefit from even more inclusive mechanisms and cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. From the onset of its engagement in this sub-region, Israel emphasized that its



emerging alliances are not intended against any other country. Namely, Israel's ties with Greece and Cyprus have not been described by Israel as anti-Turkish. When Israel reconciled with Turkey in 2016 (an agreement that did not hold for long), it did so in parallel to its ties with Egypt and the Hellenic countries, which have deep conflicts of their own with Turkey. Israel began to practice a win-win regional diplomacy that is different from its traditional zero-sum mindset. Recently, however, Israel has been taking sides in the tensions in the Mediterranean, supporting Greece and Cyprus against Turkish actions and aspirations. Nevertheless, Turkey has strategic importance for Israel, and both countries should invest efforts in improving bilateral ties, starting with an exchange of ambassadors. Israel may thus benefit from having Turkey join the EMGF, although this is not likely to be accepted by other members. Israel can also benefit from Lebanon joining. The US has been trying to mediate between Israel and Lebanon, so they can resolve their maritime border dispute, but this did not yield success yet. Joint membership of the two

countries in a regional organization may help in setting up new dialogue options.

But, most importantly, Israel should leverage developments in the Eastern Mediterranean to help it solve the conflict with the Palestinians. Restarting the peace process should be a top priority for Israel's next government, and the Mediterranean lens can enable fresh thinking and ideas on how to improve humanitarian conditions in Gaza, reestablish a unified political structure that connects the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and leverage the EMGF to becoming a regional mechanism that also produces positive incentives for Israeli-Palestinian peace and contributes to conflict resolution in the region.

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