

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN CONFLICT

FROM TURKEY-GREECE CONFRONTATION TO REGIONAL POWER
STRUGGLES

Toni Alaranta



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- At the core of the Eastern Mediterranean conflict is the increasing competition between Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on one side and Turkey on the other, in relation to the ability to determine exclusive economic zones (EEZs).
- Turkey’s foreign policy has become much more assertive and even aggressive in recent years, evolving from determined diplomatic efforts to safeguard key national interests to power projection and the use of military force.
- The current Eastern Mediterranean conflict has become part of a much wider regional power struggle extending from EU member states to Turkey and several Middle Eastern states, especially Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.
- Turkey’s most recent diplomatic openings and softening of rhetoric seem more like short-term tactics in preparation for the March 2021 EU Council meeting and the expected change in Turkey-US relations due to the new Biden administration.
- The Biden administration and the EU are poised to start filling the alleged power vacuum in the Eastern Mediterranean. For the current Turkish leadership, this new situation is unwelcome, and the country remains determined to push its own agenda.



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INTRODUCTION

For several decades, the Eastern Mediterranean conflict consisted of a three-part struggle over territorial waters, sovereignty and exclusionary national narratives between Turkey, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus. Its origins can be traced as far back as the Greek War of Independence in the 1830s, the Lausanne Peace Treaty determining the current borders of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and the failed bicomunal federal state established in Cyprus in 1960. Regarding the Cyprus conflict, the best – but ultimately lost – opportunity to resolve the issue was the 2004 Annan Plan for a bicomunal federal state. Today, the Eastern Mediterranean conflict is a multi-level and multi-actor power struggle that is unlikely to wane any time soon. In addition to Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, it also includes actors such as France, Italy, Libya, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

This Briefing Paper first identifies the main actors involved, and then proceeds to analyze the key determinants of the conflict. The paper concludes that tension in the Eastern Mediterranean will continue in the foreseeable future. A full military confrontation is unlikely, however, as NATO can provide a necessary platform for a Greece-Turkey de-escalation. This is likely to prevent an actual war, but will not be enough to produce any lasting solution in the increasingly conflict-ridden Eastern Mediterranean regional power struggle.

THE ACTORS AND THEIR EVOLVING AGENDAS

At the heart of the current Eastern Mediterranean conflict is the ability to determine exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The competition is increasing between Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on one side and Turkey on the other. This is nothing new but has now become increasingly vocal for two main reasons. First, the newly found energy resources have sharpened the existing rivalries, also inviting state-affiliated energy corporations from countries like Italy and France. Second, Turkey's foreign policy has become much more assertive and even aggressive in recent years, evolving from determined diplomatic efforts to safeguard key

national interests to power projection and the use of military force. This new assertiveness regarding the Eastern Mediterranean is known in Turkey as the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan) doctrine.¹ In practice, this has resulted in Turkey sending its own research ships, escorted by military vessels, to what are seen by the international community as the EEZs of either the Republic of Cyprus or Greece.

In some analyses, Turkey's increasingly aggressive stance is explained for the most part by its disadvantaged position in recent developments in the region, most of all due to the fact that Turkey has been left out of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, initially established in January 2020.² The East Mediterranean Gas Forum is an international body consisting of Egypt, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Jordan and Israel. In Egypt in particular, it is seen to consolidate the country's central position as a regional energy hub. This mechanism is directly linked to the confrontation between Turkey and Egypt that has been ongoing ever since the Egyptian military, under the leadership of current President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, ousted Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) from power in 2013. Since that day, the Egyptian MB leadership has found sanctuary in Istanbul, and Turkey has emerged as the leading state actor supporting the Brotherhood, allowing the continuation of the organization and its activities.³

However, pushing Turkey out of the international cooperation focusing on the commercial use of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources is insufficient to explain Turkey's current behaviour. It should be noted that as early as 2016 – years before the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum – Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made several statements about the alleged need to update the Lausanne Peace Treaty. He once did so even during an official visit to Greece. One can argue that it is indeed impossible to understand the current conflict without paying attention to Erdoğan's conviction.

1 Cengiz Çandar, 'Turkey's Blue Homeland Doctrine: Signaling Perpetual Conflict in the Mediterranean and Rough Waters Ahead', *Turkey Analyst*, 26 August, 2020, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/648-turkey%E2%80%99s-blue-homeland-doctrine-signaling-perpetual-conflict-in-the-mediterranean-and-rough-waters-ahead.html>.

2 Nathalie Tocci, 'Unpacking the Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean', IAI Commentaries, October 2020, p. 2. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali.

3 Abdelrahman Ayyash, 'The Turkish Future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood', *The Century Foundation*, 17 August, 2020, <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/>.

In November 2016, Erdoğan described this in the following words:

*The Lausanne Peace Treaty is not a sacred text, it can very well be challenged. The First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War are all gone. The power arrangements built after the Cold War are being crushed. And yet they are still trying to imprison us with the Lausanne Treaty.*⁴

Thus, one can safely say that Turkey's increasing revisionist and assertive stance regarding the status quo in its neighbourhood predates by several years the anti-Turkey aspects involved in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which has been under construction since January 2020. It is obvious that the repeated remarks by the Turkish leadership about the need to update the Lausanne Peace Treaty, especially when combined with increasing military spending and foreign policy activism in the region more generally, have upset the Greeks.

The same kind of motivation to undo the current status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean is obvious in the case of Cyprus. Back in 2004, Turkey under its current leadership invested heavily in the UN peace plan, which envisioned a bicomunal federal state on the island. This so-called Annan Plan was then put to a referendum in both ethnic communities. The Turkish Cypriot community accepted the plan with a clear majority, while the Greek side rejected it with an even larger majority. Soon after, the Republic of Cyprus became an EU member state, leaving the Turkish minority in complete international isolation. Recently, the Turkish leaders seem to have become completely disillusioned with any prospect of a federal state and are now, together with newly elected Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar, openly speaking about the two-state solution for the island. This position is also manifest in the Turkish Cypriots' attempt to bring their highly disadvantaged position to the attention of influential international actors, such as the EU and the US. Indeed, the Greek Cypriots' steps to commercialize energy resources seem to ignore the Turkish Cypriots altogether.

In its present stage, the Eastern Mediterranean conflict is thus a combination of several distinct issues that can be analyzed separately perhaps in theory but hardly in practice. The original issue is the Cyprus conflict, frozen since the 1974 Turkish invasion of one-third of the island and the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, only recognized by Turkey itself.

The other distinct conflict is largely about confronting interpretations of international maritime law between Turkey and Greece. Greece's claim for an Exclusive Economic Zone for the small islets a stone's throw away from Turkey's coasts, such as Kastellorizo, is backed by the 1982 iteration of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS III, which essentially enables islands to extend the maritime rights of the mainland nations they belong to. Turkey, for its part, has not signed UNCLOS III, but is instead following the interpretation included in the earlier UNCLOS I of 1958, which did not treat islands the same way. Instead, it assigned continental shelves to their contiguous mainland, giving the waters around most offshore islands to the nearest continental state.⁵

Finally, the third component of the current crisis is the Libyan civil war. Turkey has been very active in Libya, militarily supporting the Tripoli-based, UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). The maritime agreement between the GNA and Turkey was signed on 27 November 2019. From the Greek perspective, the main concern is that the agreement ignores the presence of the islands of Crete, Kos, Karpathos, Kastellorizo and Rhodes between the Turkish-Libyan coasts. The treaty is also disputed by Egypt, which has recently become a vocal supporter of Greece in its confrontation with Turkey. This position, on the other hand, is part of the evolving power struggle between Egypt and Turkey. In its attempt to deter Turkey's actions, Greece has also recently increased its strategic cooperation with the United Arab Emirates and France. France's strong support for both Greece and the Republic of Cyprus against Turkey is also directly related to the Libyan crisis, where Turkey's activism and determined backing of the GNA has crucially obstructed France's aspirations. Although officially neutral, France has long supported the GNA's main rival, the rebel general Khalifa Haftar.

KEY DETERMINANTS OF THE CURRENT CONFLICT

The current Eastern Mediterranean conflict has become part of a much wider regional power struggle extending from EU member states (Greece and the Republic of Cyprus and through them the entire EU) to Turkey and several Middle Eastern states. As Greece and the Republic of Cyprus are EU member states, the Eastern Mediterranean conflict is inevitably the EU's internal affair as much

4 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Türkiye'nin Yeni Güvenlik Konsepti Konferansında Yaptıkları Konuşma', 22 November, 2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/61114/turkiyenin-yeni-guvenlik-konsepti-konferansinda-yaptiklari-konusma>.

5 Jonathan Gorvett, 'Turkey's Challenge to the Regional Status Quo Begins in the Eastern Mediterranean', World Politics Review, 1 September, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29031/how-eastern-mediterranean-tensions-are-complicating-the-cyprus-turkey-dispute>.



EU-Turkey leaders' meeting in March 2020 brought President Erdoğan and Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Cavusogly around the same table with President of European Council, Charles Michel and President of European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. Source: *European Union*

as it is an unwelcome foreign policy issue. Rather than determinedly pushing for a consistent long-term policy of helping to resolve the conflict, the EU has at least thus far mainly played for time, postponing all big decisions to a future date. This stance was also applied in the December 10–11, 2020 Council meeting, when it was decided that all strict measures against Turkey, such as widening sanctions, would be considered in the next meeting in March 2021. This stems from the fact that the EU's Turkey policy is now divided by the 'hardliners' such as Greece, Cyprus, and France on one side, and Spain, Italy and Germany on the other, who are very reluctant to do anything that might further antagonize Turkey.

The position taken by states like Italy, Spain and Germany has been explained by their significant commercial interests in Turkey, and the anticipation that any measures leading to a Turkish economic crisis would also severely harm the European banking sector. The draft statement for the EU Council conclusions in December 2020 rejecting any strict measures against Turkey implicitly underscored that as a NATO ally and an EU candidate country, Turkey is seen to be in a different category conceptually in comparison to a country like Russia, which is seen to be overtly hostile towards the EU.⁶ In these circumstances, the EU has avoided taking a firm stance in countering Turkey's aggressive behaviour.

Whether or not this will change in the future is at least partly dependent on the policies adopted towards Turkey by the new Biden administration in the US. From these premises, another key determinant is the extent to which the EU and the US manage to compose a joint Turkey policy that would work as a major deterrent for Turkey's aggressive policies.

The alliance architecture now being built by all three main protagonists is likely to shape the extent to which Greece, Cyprus and Turkey are willing to push for uncompromising positions. Greece has by now become an important European party to France's increasing attempt to forge a commercial and security architecture together with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In confronting this anti-Turkish block, Turkey has its expanding influence in Libya, accompanied by its security agreement with the GNA. In addition, in the Middle Eastern alliance architecture, Turkey and Qatar stand against Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. The most recent developments, such as Israel's agreements with the UAE and Bahrain in terms of normalizing the relations (the so-called Abraham Accords), and the ending of the Qatar blockade by the KSA-led coalition, have not changed this basic mechanism.

Further, as the new Biden administration is likely to take certain positions that are less friendly to Turkey – for instance in terms of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Kurds – there are now signs that Turkey is trying to break the current alliance formation by sending

⁶ Robin Emmott, 'Exclusive - EU to toughen sanctions on Turkish drilling - draft statement', Reuters, 9 December, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-eu-draft/exclusive-eu-to-toughen-sanctions-on-turkish-drilling-draft-statement-idUSKBN28J1N6>.

cooperative signals to Israel and Egypt. There are even signs that attempts are also underway to improve relations with France. All of this can be inferred from the latest statements by Turkey's Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and even President Erdoğan himself.⁷ Recently, the Turkish leadership has also uttered some conciliatory words towards the EU, but it is difficult to see how this could change the country's main goal of obstructing all actions in the Eastern Mediterranean that are seen to 'confine Turkey to its shores'.

It is also hard to imagine that Turkey would considerably reduce its long-term goal of becoming a regional 'order producing country'. That said, there are signs that in addition to utilizing 'gunboat diplomacy', Turkey is currently preparing to take steps to invigorate the diplomatic negotiations to further its agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean. The decision to reopen the so-called Exploratory Talks with Greece, halted since 2016, clearly signals this. The same can be said about Turkey's wish for a broad Eastern Mediterranean Conference, within which all sides would be represented and where the current problems would be discussed in a constructive spirit. This wish has been accompanied by more conciliatory words regarding EU-Turkey relations.⁸

When it comes to Greece and its increased attempts to forge a chain of strategic partnerships in the Eastern Mediterranean, one can argue that the signing of the 27 November 2019 Libyan-Turkish memorandum on maritime delimitation acted as the real catalyst for implementing a more proactive foreign policy. Accordingly, Greece has managed to settle EEZ delimitation with both Italy and Egypt.⁹ Whereas Turkey is calling for a multilateral Eastern Mediterranean Conference, Greece would like to see Turkey signing UNCLOS III, through which the maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones would be settled in the context of the current international law of the seas.¹⁰ As explained above, Turkey is unlikely to do this as the current procedure is highly disadvantageous from its perspective. Like Greece, the Republic of Cyprus has recently signed an array of defence and security agreements with various regional actors, such as the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Israel and Egypt.

CONCLUSIONS: AVOIDING WAR BUT TENSION IS HERE TO STAY

The new alliance architecture and security arrangements are still relatively flexible and are duly enabling Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey to settle their long-term disputes, if that is indeed what they are seeking. However, with every confrontational step and show of military power the domestic expectations have increased, thus making it harder to seek compromises. What used to be a long-standing dispute over maritime borders between Turkey and Greece, accompanied by the frozen conflict over divided Cyprus, is now part of a regional power struggle with several European and Middle Eastern actors.

Rather than determinedly seeking a compromise, Turkey's recent diplomatic opening and softening of rhetoric seems more like a short-term tactic in preparation for the March EU Council meeting and the expected change in Turkey-US relations due to the new Biden administration. With more conciliatory statements, Turkey wishes to avoid any hard sanctions from the EU and prepare the ground for a new beginning with the US. A real change for the better in the Eastern Mediterranean, not to mention resolving the current conflict and all its various side effects, would however require a crucially new foreign policy orientation, something that Turkey is highly unlikely to go for. Sensing this, Greece and Cyprus are likely to deepen their security arrangements with regional states, simultaneously using the solidarity argument in an attempt to get Italy, Spain, and Germany to toughen their actions against Turkey.

There seems to be an almost undisputed consensus that the Trump administration's unilateral policies and lack of cooperation with Western allies created a power vacuum, especially in the Middle East. It is also often stated that Turkey was one of the actors determined to utilize this, from Libya to Syria, from the Eastern Mediterranean to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Biden administration and the EU will no doubt find it easier to cooperate and, consequently, even start filling the alleged power vacuum. It should be noted that for the current Turkish leadership, this new situation is unwelcome, and the country is determined to push its own agenda, also in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As things stand now, it can be expected that the EU will slightly widen the list of Turkish individuals on whom sanctions have been imposed in its March 2021 Council meeting. It can also be expected that the new Biden administration and the EU can agree in principle on how to respond to Turkey, offering opportunities

7 Sedat Ergin, '2020'den 2021'e dış politika (5)-Mısır ile ilişkilerde kıpırdama var, ya İsrail?', *Hürriyet*, 5 January, 2020, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/2020den-2021e-dis-politika-5-misir-ile-iliskilerde-kipirdama-var-ya-israil-41706212>.

8 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Avrupa Birliği Ülkeleri Büyükelçileri ile Toplantıda Yaptıkları Konuşma', 12 January, 2021, <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/123549/avrupa-birligi-ulkeleri-buyukelcileri-ile-toplantida-yaptiklari-konusma->.

9 Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, 'The Eastern Mediterranean as an Emerging Crisis Zone: Greece and Cyprus in a Volatile Regional Environment', in *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters: Perspectives On Emerging Geopolitical Realities*, ed. Michael Tanchum (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2020), p. 27.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

for both cooperation and for drawing certain red lines. None of these is likely to change Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policies, but in the best-case scenario they will push Greece and Turkey to seek a mutually acceptable negotiation framework. As such, the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean will continue for the foreseeable future. A full military confrontation is likely to be avoided, however, as NATO can provide a necessary platform for a Greece-Turkey de-escalation. This is likely to prevent an actual war, but it will not be enough to provide any real long-term solution to the increasingly tense Eastern Mediterranean regional power struggle any time soon. /