

IS THE CRISIS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ABOUT ENERGY OR SOVEREIGNTY?*

Doğu Akdeniz'deki Kriz Enerjiyle mi; Yoksa Egemenlikle mi İlgili?

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Abstract

In this article the reasons for the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean is analyzed. The analysis shows that the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean is not merely one of maritime jurisdiction or energy but also one of sovereignty. Additionally, the crisis, which started as a territorial dispute and/or conflicts over sharing of energy resources between Turkey and Greece, later revealed global power interests at work, including the EU's effort to diversify its natural resources, America and China's struggle for control of the waterways in the region and Russia's drive to expand in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, jurisdiction, energy, EU, US.

Öz

Bu makalede Doğu Akdeniz krizinin sebepleri ele alınmıştır. Çalışma, Doğu Akdeniz'deki sorunun sadece deniz yetki alanlarının sınırlandırılması veya enerji olmadığı, aynı zamanda egemenlik sorunu olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. İlaveten, Türkiye ve Yunanistan arasındaki bölgesel sorun ve/veya enerji kaynaklarının paylaşımı olarak başlayan kriz daha sonra, AB'nin enerji kaynaklarını çeşitlendirme, ABD ve Çin'in bölgedeki suollarının kontrolü, Rusya'nın ise Doğu Akdeniz'de genişleme çabaları gibi küresel çıkarlarını açığa çıkarmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğu Akdeniz, Yetki Alanı, Enerji, AB, ABD.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Turkey began using its seismic ships to look for hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean. The West perceived these efforts as the start of a crisis that peaked in 2020, but this view fails to account for the many incidents that led up to this crisis. The main reason why things escalated in the Eastern Mediterranean in the summer 2020 is unilateral efforts by the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC), backed by Greece, the EU and the U.S., to keep Turkey out of the process.

GASC's agreements with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007), and Israel (2010), which included licensing rights with oil companies and the beginning of offshore drilling activities in 2011, were the main triggers of the escalation. Efforts by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 2011, 2012 and 2019¹ to share this wealth equitably using different multilateral mechanisms, such as the EU or the UN, were rejected by GASC. Despite this, unilateral efforts by the TRNC continued. In response, Turkey signed an agreement with the TRNC in 2011 to begin hydrocarbon exploration and in 2018 began seismic surveys on its continental shelf with its own seismic ships. This is when all hell broke loose.²

The increasing importance of the Eastern Mediterranean is a function of its rich hydrocarbon resources and the mix of political incentives driving various parties to intervene. Throughout history, different countries are attracted to the Eastern Mediterranean by different factors: the U.S. is driven by the pressure from the Israeli lobby, Russia by a long-lasting drive to access warm-water ports, and England, France, Italy, and Turkey are attracted by their imperial histories. In addition to all these countries,

1 "Eastern Mediterranean Turkey's Legal and Political Views", *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/Eastern-Mediterranean-Turkey-s-Legal-and-Political-Views-5-February-2020.pdf, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

2 "Doğu Akdeniz Çalıştayı-Akdeniz Üniversitesi (Açılış ve 1. Oturum)", *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpSsPPiTk8&t=434s>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

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many others are driven by an interest in newly discovered or potential natural resources.³

The Arab Spring and subsequent crises in Syria and Libya generated a surge of refugees to Europe. The only geopolitical struggle in the Mediterranean involving the EU is the energy dispute in the eastern part of the sea.⁴ The EU's energy-focused policies aimed to prevent this refugee flow but failed to address the roots of the problem. Many parties have also criticized the new EUNAVFOR MED Irini operation, which in March 2020 replaced the EUNAVFOR MED Sophia because this change downsized the EU's involvement in the migration crisis.⁵

The Eastern Mediterranean generates lots of controversy because of its rich deposits of undersea hydrocarbons and the controversies they raise about how to distribute them equitably.⁶ That, plus ongoing controversies over control of the Middle East and North Africa, make the region ripe for conflicts. This is demonstrated by the presence in the region of warships from 44⁷ countries.

Joint exploitation of Eastern Mediterranean's gas resources could serve as the basis of a regional dialogue, but the region's profound geopolitical rifts, such as those over Cyprus and Palestine, and disputes between Israel and Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan⁸, mean that political, juridical and economic disputes will continue.

3 Kemal İnat-Burhanettin Duran, "Main Parameters of Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean Policy", *Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey: Political, Judicial, and Economic Perspectives*, SETA Publications, Ankara 2020, p. 8.

4 Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, "Western Policies in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey: Political, Judicial, and Economic Perspectives*, SETA Publications, Ankara 2020, p. 109.

5 Marius Pricopi, "The Military Operation Eunavfor Med Irini-A Downscale of the EU's Involvement in the Migration Crisis", *Land Forces Academy Review*, 4(100), 2020, p. 303.

6 S. Süha Çubukçuoğlu-Salih Saner, "Aspects of Hydrocarbon Insecurity in the Eastern Mediterranean: Maritime Claims, Access, and Quest for Energy Resources", *Turkish Journal of Energy Policy*, 2018, 3(6), p. 30.

7 Meryem İlayda Atlas-Deniz İstikbal, "Rusya ve Çin'in Doğu Akdeniz Politikaları", *Doğu Akdeniz ve Türkiye'nin Hakları*, SETA Kitapları 60, Ankara 2020, p. 184.

8 "Energy: A Shaping Factor for Regional Stability in the Eastern Mediterranean", *European Parliament*, [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), (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

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STRATEGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) says the Eastern Mediterranean is separated from the Western Mediterranean by a line drawn between Cape Bon in Tunisia and Cape Lilibeo at the western end of Sicily.⁹ Turkey, the TRNC, the GASC, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Libya and Lebanon are actively involved in the current Eastern Mediterranean dispute.

There are some longlasting conflicts in the region such as the Israeli-Palestinian one that began in the mid-20th century and another one in Syria and Libya that began in 2011 after then which is so-called "Arab Spring". The last one led to the gravest consequences in Syria and Libya, which is considered as the most significant geopolitical event and the largest social mobilization that have shaped Middle Eastern politics in the post-Cold War era.

Last but not least, Cyprus problem that began in 1963, after Greek Cypriots broke down the partnership Republic formed in 1960 is still in the agenda of the international community.¹⁰

The Eastern Mediterranean serves as the maritime trade route that connects East and West because it reaches Mesopotamia and the Near East via Turkey and Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf via the Suez Canal.¹¹

This region's importance vastly increased after the opening of the Suez Canal, which shortened the Europe-Far East route by 7,000 nautical

9 "Limits of Oceans And Seas", *International Hydrographic Organization*, Monte-Carlo 1953, p. 15.

10 "Cyprus (Historical Overview)", *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/cyprus-historical-overview_.en.mfa, (Date of Accession:16.04.2021).

11 Cihat Yaycı, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Deniz Yetki Alanlarının Paylaşılması Sorunu ve Türkiye", *Bilge Strateji*, 4(6), 2012, p. 4.

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miles (NM) compared to the route around the Cape of Good Hope.¹² Today, 20% of the world's oil and 30% of its commerce travel through the Suez Canal.

Cyprus is the most important island in the Eastern Mediterranean both geopolitically and geostrategically because it controls access to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean like a control tower controls airplanes at an airport¹³. In military terms it acts like a stationary aircraft carrier controlling access to all the countries of the Middle East: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and, in part, Egypt.¹⁴

One of the most important political figures in British history, Benjamin Disraeli, discerned the importance of the Cyprus after touring the East¹⁵ and called Cyprus the portal to West Asia.¹⁶ From the perspective of states claiming to rule the Middle East, Cyprus is also the key that opens or closes access to this area. The island is a springboard and a garrison from which to intervene in crisis zones in the Middle East. British air bases on the island (Akrotiri and Dhekelia) were used during Operation Unified Protector (OUP) when, under NATO's umbrella, raids were launched against the Gaddafi regime.

The Eastern Mediterranean's strategic importance is made evident when oil and natural gas are transported from the Caspian to world markets.¹⁷ The 1,768 kilometer-long Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which delivers oil from Azerbaijan's Sangachal terminal through Turkey and Georgia to the Ceyhan sea terminal in İskenderun, is an important focus of strategic energy rivalries in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸

12 Yaycı, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

13 Dursun Yıldız, *Tarihi Geçmiş, Stratejik Önemi ve Su Sorunu Açısından Akdeniz'in Doğusu*, Bizim Kitaplar, İstanbul 2007, p. 61.

14 Altemur Kılıç, "1571 Yılındaki Fetihten Günümüze Kıbrıs Gerçeği", *Yeniçağ*, 20 February 2011.

15 İsmail Şahin, "İngiltere'nin Akdeniz Siyasetinde Kıbrıs (1580-1878)", *Asia Minor Studies-International Journal of Sciences*, 4(7), 2016, p. 165.

16 Stephen J. Lee, *Gladstone and Disraeli*, Routledge, London 2005, p. 102.

17 Dursun Yıldız, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

18 Merve Aksoy, "Doğu Akdeniz Enerji Rekabeti", *İNSAMER*, https://www.academia.edu/29286231/Doğu_Akdeniz_Enerji_Rekabeti, (Date of Accession:16.02.2021).

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Moreover, Russia entered the region in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis. This has intensified the Eastern Mediterranean's role as an area of conflict and forced Turkey to rethink many of its policies. The illegal Mediterranean's immigration that began during the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis confirmed the region's strategic importance to Turkey and the EU.

The region has vast energy reserves. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated that the Levant basin houses 1.7 billion barrels of oil and 2 trillion m³ of natural gas, according to recent findings, and for the next 20 to 25 years could easily meet regional demands with surplus supply available for export to the outside world.¹⁹ Moreover, the region's hydrocarbon resources also present an opportunity for Europe, where gas import requirements will grow after 2020 due to declining domestic production and the expiration of long-term contracts with Norway and Russia.²⁰ The Eastern Mediterranean gives Europe the chance to diversify both energy supplies and trade routes.

Lastly, the Mediterranean plays an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Because of its geographic position and economic advantages, the Suez Canal has in some cases replaced the Panama Canal as a way to move goods from Asia to Europe and North America. This is especially true for large container ships²¹, and explains why the Eastern Mediterranean has assumed a central role in China's BRI's maritime component, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

From Turkey's point of view, the first state practice in the Eastern Mediterranean is, blocking of the GASC-flagged drilling vessel Northern

19 Çubukçuoğlu-Saner, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

20 "Energy: A Shaping", *op.cit.*, p. 5.

21 Frans Paul van der Putten, "Infrastructure and Geopolitics: China's Emerging Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18(4), 2016, p. 339.

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Access south of Rhodes²² in March 2002. This ship was blocked by a Turkish frigate, and neither Greece nor GASC objected to Turkey's action.²³

One year later, the Seville Map was published by a university in Spain, an EU member. On that map, Turkey—which as the longest coastline on the Mediterranean—was granted only limited maritime jurisdiction, namely, over the Gulf of Antalya²⁴ and Kastellorizo, a Greek island -with an area of 10 km²- was granted with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that confined Turkey to an area of 41,000 km², a small patch of the Mediterranean.²⁵

After the Northern Access incident, the Norwegian research ship Marlene Ostervold was challenged by a Greek gunboat on November 13, 2008 while conducting research on behalf of Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) south of Kastellorizi island. The research ship tried to proceed but had to stop after Greek authorities intervened with Norwegian officials.²⁶

In terms of oil and natural gas exploration in the region, 2015 was the year that changed the status quo. That's when the Italian company ENI discovered the Zohr natural gas field in Egyptian waters. This was the largest natural gas field ever discovered in the Mediterranean²⁷, with 850 billion m³ of natural gas.

In 2017 and 2018, Turkish military activities enjoyed considerable success in identifying ships that violated Turkey's jurisdiction and in adding drilling and seismic research ships to its inventory. On January

22 Hakan Arıdemir-Çağatay Allı, "Doğu Akdeniz Bölgesindeki Münhasır Ekonomik Bölge Tartışmalarının Analizi", *İktisadi İdari ve Siyasal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 4(10), 2019, p. 194.

23 Cem Gürdeniz, *Mavi Vatanın Güney Cephesi "Doğu Akdeniz"*, Pankuş Yayınları, Ankara 2020, p. 73.

24 Güney, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

25 İnat-Duran, *op.cit.* p. 11.

26 Gürdeniz, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

27 Muhittin Taman-Mehmet Çağatay Güler, "The Cyprus Dispute: The Prerequisite for the Solution of the Eastern Mediterranean Problem", *Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey: Political, Judicial, and Economic Perspectives*, SETA Publications 60, Ankara 2020, p. 37.

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5, 2019, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum was established by several export, import, and transit-route states (GASC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt)²⁸. Turkey was excluded although it clearly shared many characteristics with members. The publication of NAVTEX²⁹ for the Turkish drilling ship Fatih on May 3, 2019 was another milestone for Turkey in the wake of the Northern Access case.

From Turkey's perspective, the next important step in this process was the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the UN-recognized Libyan government on November 27, 2019. This agreement determined maritime jurisdiction areas, defined security and military cooperation, and called for Turkish troops to be sent to Libya at the request of the Government of National Accord (GNA).³⁰ The agreement was approved by the national assemblies of both countries in December 2019 and registered by the UN Secretariat.³¹ This nullified efforts to restrict Turkey to an area of 41,000 km² in the Mediterranean, as called for in documents such as the Seville map.³²

In January 2020, an agreement on EastMed, a project designed to transport gas drilled by Israel and GASC to Europe over a 1,900 km long pipeline, was signed by Israel, Greece, and GASC. This gas from this pipeline is priced two-and-one half times higher than its Russian counterpart.³³ This puts the project at a disadvantage for two reasons:

28 Menderes Kurt-Talha İsmail Duman, "Bölge Ülkelerinin Doğu Akdeniz Politikaları", *Doğu Akdeniz ve Türkiye'nin Hakları*, SETA Kitapları 60, Ankara, 2020, p. 170.

29 NAVTEX is a maritime communications system that allows ships to inform other vessels about their presence in an area, and provides other information such as navigational and meteorological warnings and forecasts and urgent maritime safety information.

30 Patrick Wintour, "Libyan Government Activates Cooperation Accord with Turkey", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/20/libyan-government-activates-cooperation-accord-with-turkey>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

31 UN Certificate of Registration No:69975, 30 September 2020.

32 İnat-Duran, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

33 Atlas, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

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price, and the need for Turkish consent because the pipeline will pass³⁴ through Turkey's continental shelf.

Beginning in June 2020, tempers flared in the Eastern Mediterranean. On June 10, 2020, the Tanzanian-flagged Turkish cargo ship Çirkin was sailing off the coast of Libya when two attempts were made to stop it for a cargo inspection. The first was by a Greek warship, which justified its action by referring to EU's Operation Irini³⁵ and the second was by a French ship taking part in NATO's Operation Sea Guardian. The presence of escorting Turkish warships led both Greek and French frigates to stand down, but after this incident the NAVTEX wars started.

Turkey published a NAVTEX message that covered the area between Rhodes and Kastellorizo from July 21 to August 2, 2020, when the Turkish seismic research ship Oruç Reis was scheduled to conduct seismic surveys.³⁶ Tensions increased when Greece deployed jets and warships to the region that were countered by their Turkish equivalents.³⁷ The increase in tensions stopped for a while after German Chancellor Merkel's intervention, and as a goodwill gesture, the Oruç Reis' NAVTEX was suspended by Turkish authorities³⁸ to give diplomacy a chance to work. However the Greek side exploited the cancellation by signing an EEZ

34 UNCLOS Article 79: Submarine cables and pipelines on the continental shelf, sub para 3: "The delineation of the course for the laying of such pipelines on the continental shelf is subject to the consent of the coastal State".

35 Operation Irini, primarily focused on the UN arms embargo imposed by the UNSCR 1970 (2011) and UNSCR 2292 (2016) launched on March 31, 2020 for one year period with secondary tasks similar to Operation Sofia. There were criticisms from the very beginning of the Operation Irini for having risk of not being able to enforce a comprehensive arms embargo, thus potentially reinforcing one party (Haftar's Libyan National Army-LNA) to the conflict to the detriment of the other (the UN backed government in Tripoli). Federico Alagna, "From Sophia to Irini:EU Mediterranean Policies and the Urgency of "Doing Something", *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 20(32), May 2020, p. 3.

36 "Oruç Reis Gemisi İçin Navtex İlan Edildi", *Sözcü*, 10 August 2020.

37 "Savaşın Eşiğine Geldik", *Sözcü*, 23 July 2020.

38 "Türkiye, Doğu Akdeniz'deki Doğal Gaz Arama Faaliyetlerini Beklemeye Aldı", *Euronews*, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/07/28/turkiye-dogu-akdeniz-deki-dogal-gaz-arama-faaliyetlerini-ask-ya-aldi>, (Date of Accession:16.02.2021).

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treaty with Egypt on August 6, 2020.³⁹ As a result, Turkey published new NAVTEXs that extended Oruç Reis' search activities.⁴⁰

The next event that increased tensions came when France deployed its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴¹ That was followed by the U.S. lifting its thirty-three-year-old arms embargo of GASC.

After NATO Secretary-General Jeff Stoltenberg called for a dialogue to ease tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey and Greece agreed to start technical talks on “deconfliction procedures” to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents in the area. These talks established a mechanism to reduce conflicts.⁴² For the first time since 2016, Turkey and Greece also agreed to resume exploratory talks over their contested maritime claims.⁴³

In October 2020, an EU summit addressed the issue of relations with Turkey and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result of this summit, Turkey was threatened with sanctions and the reduction or interruption of economic relations and financial aid.⁴⁴

Turkey's seismic ship Oruçreis which had been pulled out of the area to give diplomacy a chance—departed from port of Antalya after one

39 “Egypt and Greece Sign Agreement on Exclusive Economic Zone”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-greece/egypt-and-greece-sign-agreement-on-exclusive-economic-zone-idUSKCN252216>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

40 “Ve Oruç Reis İçin Yeni Navtex Geldi”, *Sözcü*, 27 August 2020.

41 “France Deploys Charles De Gaulle Aircraft Carrier to Eastern Mediterranean”, *South Front*, <https://southfront.org/france-deploys-charles-de-gaulle-aircraft-carrier-to-eastern-mediterranean/>, (Date of Accession: 13.02.2021).

42 “Military De-Confliction Mechanism between Greece and Turkey Established at NATO”, *NATO*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178523.htm, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

43 “Exploratory Talks between Greece and Turkey Resumed in Istanbul”, *Keep Talking Greece*, <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2021/01/25/greece-turkey-exploratory-talks/>, (Date of Accession: 27.01.2021).

44 “Outcome Of The Special European Council Meeting, 1-2 October 2020”, *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog*, <https://epthinktank.eu/2020/10/06/outcome-of-the-special-european-council-meeting-1-2-october-2020/>, (Date of Accession: 10.02.2021).

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month and the U.S. State Department's spokesperson's tweet described this act as a "calculated provocation."⁴⁵

On November 22, 2020, the German frigate Hamburg, operating under the tactical command of a Greek commodore in the EU-led Operation Irini, interrogated the Turkish container vessel MV *Roseline-A*, which had departed Istanbul for Libya's port of Misratah carrying food and paint supplies to an area 100 miles off the Benghazi Coast. This was seen as a very hostile EU act against freedom of navigation and Turkey's sovereignty that could not be resolved easily.⁴⁶ None of the two conditions⁴⁷ required under the UNSCR 2292(2016) were met and no arms were found on the Turkish container vessel.

From December 10-11, 2020, two of the topics discussed in the EU summit were the Eastern Mediterranean and relations with Turkey. The European Council assessed the evolving situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and, while no sanctions were imposed,⁴⁸ it declared that "the EU would seek to coordinate with the US on matters relating to Turkey and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean."⁴⁹

After the summit another NAVTEX was published for Oruç Reis' search activities that lasted until June 15, 2021 and covered the area within the Gulf of Antalya. This move pleased the E.U. while criticized from Turkish academics for not being conducted in the overlapping area

45 Paul Antonopoulos, "U.S. 'State Department 'Deplores' Turkey's 'Calculated Provocation' in the East Mediterranean", *Greek City Times*, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/10/14/u-s-state-department-deplores-turkeys-calculated-provocation-in-the-east-mediterranean/>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

46 Cem Gürdeniz, "Piracy-Like Actions of Germany and the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean", *United World*, <https://uwidata.com/14469-piracy-like-actions-of-germany-and-the-eu-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>, (Date of Accession: 17.02.2021).

47 The intervening state or international organization must have "reasonable grounds to believe are carrying arms or related materiel to or from Libya"; b) "good-faith efforts to first obtain the consent of the vessel's flag State prior to any inspections".

48 "AB Liderleri Türkiye'ye Yaptırım Kararı Almadı", *Sözcü*, 11 December 2020.

49 "10-11 December 2020, External Relations, Eastern Mediterranean", *European Council*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/12/10-11/#>, (Date of Accession: 17.02.2021).

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between the Turkish-Libyan and Greek-Egypt EEZ treaties, and seen as a move to prevent potential sanctions being imposed against Turkey during the March 2021 EU summit.⁵⁰

Among the topics discussed, during the last European Council meeting held on March 25, 2021, was the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Relatively soft tone was used against Turkey with the condition to de-escalate the tension in the region. Bilateral talks between Turkey-Greece and talks on Cyprus issue at the end of April 2021, under the UN leadership were also addressed.⁵¹

POLICIES OF TURKEY AND THE EU OVER THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Throughout the most of the Cold War period, Turkey was forced to focus on the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits by NATO. At the beginning of 2000's, while the Western Navies were downsizing, the Turkish Navy increased its strength with national moves. On the other hand, by the increase in public consciousness with regards to the importance of being a maritime power and maritime geopolitics, the parameters of Turkey's foreign policy behavior have been changed. Incentive to understand that importance, was led by the Turkish Navy and the developing defence industry. In the midst of this context, the "Blue Homeland" doctrine that was devised by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006 with the aim of bolstering Turkey's resilience at sea and protect the country's maritime rights, came into forefront. This doctrine has nothing to do with neo-Ottomanism, expansionism or adventurism but it is a result of a change in minds to look towards the surrounding seas with a wider perspective.

50 Naim Babüroğlu, "2021'de Türkiye'nin Dış Politikadaki Konumu...", *Veryansın TV*, 3 January 2021.

51 "Outlook for the Meetings of EU Leaders On 25-26 March 2021, European Parliamentary Research", *Service Blog*, <https://epthinktank.eu/2021/03/23/outlook-for-the-meetings-of-eu-leaders-on-25-26-march-2021/>, (Date of Accession: 15.04.2021).

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Turkey's current Eastern Mediterranean policy is designed to protect the country's security and economy while also observing international law. Turkey's security is directly affected not only by the Cyprus problem, but also by on-going conflicts and struggles in Syria, Libya, and Palestine. Developments in Lebanon and Egypt have affected Turkey's security, if only indirectly.⁵²

Policies pursued by global powers such as the U.S., the E.U., and Russia are also linked to Turkey's policies, particularly as regards security, energy, and economic issues. These issues are critical to Turkey because it depends on energy imports and natural resources from the Eastern Mediterranean. But jurisdictional problems in the region moved to the forefront after Turkey signed a treaty with Libya addressing activity by seismic research and drilling ships on its continental shelf.

Turkey's position in the Eastern Mediterranean is based on international law and jurisprudence, which hold that islands distorting equitable delimitation cannot generate continental shelf and EEZ. And its objectives are: fair and equitable delimitation of maritime boundaries, protection of Turkey's continental shelf rights against maximalist and excessive maritime boundary claims, protection of Turkish Cypriots' rights to offshore resources and creation of a genuine, inclusive, fair and equitable off-shore energy cooperation mechanisms with the participation of all parties, including the Turkish Cypriots.⁵³

Sharing of the hydrocarbon resources is not the main reason behind the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean conversely, is the part of the policy of soft containment against Turkey by the West. But Turkey has the capacity to limit this containment strategy as seen in the EEZ treaty with

⁵² İnat-Duram, *op.cit.*, p. 6

⁵³ "Article by Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu titled "Our Preference in Eastern Mediterranean is Diplomacy without Preconditions", *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-kathimerini-makalesi-15-9-2020.en.mfa>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

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Libya, and aims to continue its balance policy with flexible partnerships and dialogue mechanisms while exercising its own sovereign rights and advocating for those of Turkish Cypriots.

The EU ignores Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and considers Greece and GASC as an integrated geographic formation. Both Greece and GASC extended their Eastern Mediterranean policies towards the sea which they europeanized with the EEZ treaties and hydrocarbon researches. This move added a new dimension to the problem and with this move, Eastern Mediterranean turned into an area of sovereignty dispute from Turkey and TRNC's perspective.

Furthermore it is not only a sovereignty problem for Turkey but also for other actors like Russia and the EU, due to the fact that the anticipated amount of gas to be drilled in the Eastern Mediterranean is very low and inconvenient compared to Russia's reserves. Hence it will meet a very low percentage of the European needs.⁵⁴ Therefore, if it had not been a sovereignty problem, EU would have not deal with such an expensive and troublesome resources.

Energy security is essential for states' sovereignty, survival and role in international affairs. At an EU level, geopolitical developments in the Eastern Mediterranean have pushed the EU to follow an interventionist energy strategy in pipeline politics with an eye to protect EU sovereignty in terms of its foreign policy autonomy.⁵⁵

The EU increasingly perceives the Russian role in EU energy security as a risk to EU's sovereignty rights. An export strategy without Turkey's inclusion into the process will be much more expensive, less secure and

54 Meryem İlayda Atlas, "Enerji mi, Egemenlik mi: Rusya'nın Doğu Akdeniz'de Var Olma Stratejisi", *Kriter*, <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-dogu-akdenizde-ne-oluyor/enerji-mi-egemenlik-mi-rusyanin-dogu-akdenizde-var-olma-stratejisi>, (Date of Accession: 15.04.2021).

55 Filippou Proedrou, "A Geopolitical Account of the Eastern Mediterranean Conundrum: Sovereignty, Balance of Power and Energy Security Considerations", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, p. 3.

an unrealistic option. Greece and GASC excludes that option which would also potentially compromise their sovereignty.

POLICIES OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POWERS OVER THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

When it comes to regional powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, Italy has a broad strategy—and as part of this strategy, wants to be a gas distribution center.⁵⁶ This makes the security of the Euro-Mediterranean region vital to Italy's national interests.⁵⁷

France is among the many powers attracted by the vacuum created by the current geopolitical struggle in the Mediterranean. In addition to actions taken against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, France has a huge opportunity to move to the forefront among the players active there. In this regard, French President Emanuel Macron expected to score economic gains through the French energy firm TOTAL.⁵⁸ France's Eastern Mediterranean policy can be summarized as follows: prove itself effective both politically and militarily; play the role assigned to it within the greater Middle East initiative as a representative of European power; make Turkey a more problematic NATO member by getting the U.S. to recognize that this is a project of a European Army and reassert "Big France" once again as a colonial power in the Mediterranean basin.⁵⁹ Another component of this strategy is Greece's intention to modernize its army with a budget of 10 bn USD, most of it used to buy weapons from France, including

56 Güney, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

57 "International Security and Defence White Paper", *The Ministry of Defence*, Italy, Article 44.

58 Güney, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

59 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "Fransa ve Yunanistan: Doğu Akdeniz'deki Büyük Hesaplaşmanın Vekil Aktörleri", *Aydınlık*, 9 September 2020.

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eighteen French Rafale fighter jets,⁶⁰ and to lease French FREMM frigates for five years. Greece also wants to procure Gowind or Belharra-class vessels after its FREMM leasing agreement ends.⁶¹ This is another reason why France is acting so aggressively in the Eastern Mediterranean and provoking Turkey to respond.

Germany, which has special relations with the U.S. and Russia, tried to observe and control different French and Italian Mediterranean strategies to manage their positive and negative effects on European Union.⁶² Germany's Eastern Mediterranean goals are based on ending discussions on the future of the EU and its position in the region. The country aims to transform the EU into a powerful global actor on political and security matters; reduce its dependence on the U.S.; become an independent actor; and move ahead of Turkey in this arena.⁶³ Germany also plays the role of an umpire between the EU and Turkey, but this goal was damaged after a Turkish container vessel was unlawfully⁶⁴ interrogated by a German frigate.

The Eastern Mediterranean is critically important to China because it is part of its MSR. Under this strategy, China is focused on expanding its influence in Asia, Africa, and Europe through new infrastructure projects and strengthened economic ties. The hub function played by the port of Piraeus in Greece goes beyond the Sino-EU trade relationship to affect regional shipping patterns in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.⁶⁵ Beijing's

60 "Biz "Görüşmeden Ne Çıkacak" Diye Beklerken, Yunanistan'dan Türkiye'ye Göndermeli Askeri Hamle", *Oda Tv*, <https://odatv4.com/turkiyeye-karsi-izmalar-atildi-25012138.html>, (Date of Accession: 27.01.2021).

61 "Greece to Lease French FREMM Frigates amid Turkey Tensions in Aegean", *The Defense Post*, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/04/21/greece-lease-french-fremm-frigates-turkey-aegean/>, (Date of Accession: 27.01.2021).

62 Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

63 Erol, *loc.cit.*

64 Başak Köksal, "EUNAVFOR MED İrini Operasyonu Çerçevesinde Roseline-A Gemisine Karşı Gerçekleştirilen Askeri Müdahalenin Hukuka Uygunluğunun Değerlendirilmesi", *Istanbul Center of International Law*, https://icil.org.tr/eunavfor-med-irini-operasyonu-cercevesinde-roseline-a-gemisine-karsi-gerceklestirilen-askeri-mudahalenin-hukuka-uygunlugunun-degerlendirilmesi/#_ednref15, (Date of Accession: 17.02.2021).

65 Putten, *op.cit.*, p. 342.

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policy for the Eastern Mediterranean is as follows: first, establish contacts with every country in the region, including countries facing disputes; second, put trade at the center of relations; and move to a win-win policy.⁶⁶ Lastly, China competes with the U.S. for economic influence of key countries in the Eastern Mediterranean such as Egypt, Greece, and Israel. Examples of this policy at work include the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone treaty, Chinese shipping firm COSCO's engagement with Pireus port in Greece, and China's engagements in Haifa and Ashdod ports in Israel.⁶⁷

Russia is following a wait and see⁶⁸ policy. It returned to the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015 by participating in the Syrian war which created an opportunity of invaluable sphere of influence. This return has inspired a new geostrategic grouping in the Eastern Mediterranean around Washington and Moscow. Russia is also trying to be an influential actor in energy markets through its companies Gazprom, Rosneft, and Tatneft. For these reasons, Russia's policy on the Eastern Mediterranean can be summarized as follows: protect its acquisitions in Syria; strengthen its presence in the Mediterranean; make Turkey and Greece—especially Turkey—dependent on it both during and between crises; encourage Turkey to break from the Western alliance; and strike a big blow on NATO and the Western Alliance.⁶⁹

The Mediterranean has been a major concern of Western actors, including the U.S.. U.S. intervention in the crisis is part of a broader

66 Mehmet Ali Güller, "Çin'in Doğu Akdeniz Politikası", <https://mehmetaliguller.com/2020/08/12/cinin-dogu-akdeniz-politikasi/>, (Date of Accession:16.02.2021).

67 Osman Başbüyük, "Büyük Oyun II-Doğu Akdeniz", [sunsavunma.net](https://www.sunsavunma.net/buyuk-oyun-ii-dogu-akdeniz/), <https://www.sunsavunma.net/buyuk-oyun-ii-dogu-akdeniz/>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

68 Ruslan Mamedov, "Russia's 'Wait and See' Policies and Libyan Settlement" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/russias-wait-and-see-policies-and-libyan-settlement-24692>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

69 Erol, *loc.cit.*

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strategy of encircling China's BRI through one of its two routes.⁷⁰ The Chinese government included the Mediterranean in the maritime aspect of its ambitious BRI, with the westernmost part of the maritime commercial route going through the Suez Canal to ports in Greece and Italy.⁷¹

Additionally, Moscow's growing strength in the region led the Trump administration to return to the traditional American policy of constraining and containing Russia, but by using offshore punitive power, such as NATO, proxies, and new, regional issue-based alignments.⁷² This came as part of an awareness that for the U.S., Russian presence in the region is more important than that of ISIS. It also reflects significant contradictions among competing components of the U.S. administration, including the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department.⁷³ No substantial policy change is expected in newly elected U.S. president Biden's administration.

One U.S. strategic alignment that can shape the Eastern Mediterranean's future development was foreseen by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, an American-based think tank. The Center pointed to factors at work in the area such as: exploring greater trilateral (the U.S., Greece, and Cyprus) and quadrilateral cooperation (the U.S., Greece, Cyprus, and Israel) through an Eastern Mediterranean dialogue. The Center also noted that one of two top priorities for advancing U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean is to manage growing policy divergence with Turkey by seeking to recalibrate U.S.-

70 One route running through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to ports in the Mediterranean, and the other through the South China Sea to the South Pacific.

71 Aviad Rubin-Ehud Eiran, "Regional Maritime Security in the Eastern Mediterranean: Expectations and Reality", *International Affairs*, 95(5), 2019, p. 989.

72 Güney, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

73 Kılıç Buğra Kanat-Alexander Chreeky, *Libya'da Amerikan Varlığı, Libya Krizi Bölgesel ve Küresel Aktörlerin Politikaları*, SETA Kitapları 60, Ankara 2020, p. 159.

Turkish ties.⁷⁴ Therefore, the U.S. policy on the Eastern Mediterranean can be summarized as: unify the West against a common “other”; consolidate its leadership over the West while pulling Turkey back to its previous axes; and pull Russia out from the Eastern Mediterranean by forcing it to break its ties with China.⁷⁵

ONGOING EFFORTS AND PROPOSALS FOR THE SOLUTION FROM TURKEY’S PERSPECTIVE

Solving the problems in the Eastern Mediterranean depends primarily on the solution of the Cyprus dispute. Long-standing sovereignty disputes over the island and GASC’s self-centered policy—deciding on the island’s maritime jurisdiction alone, *although there is another sovereign country in the north of the island*—backed by global powers such as the EU and the U.S., is the main trigger for disputes. Another aspect of the problem is Greece’s ambitious and unlawful acts against Turkey’s jurisdiction. Lastly the EU’s dependence on Russian energy supplies and its desire to diversify sources found in the region also have a significant effect on disputes. As we have noted, the cost of natural gas delivered to Europe via the EastMed project from Cyprus over the Crete-Italy route is 2.5 times more expensive than Russian gas. Europe’s insistence on this project despite the high cost is a sign of how important this goal is to the EU.

The EU has no competence in determining maritime boundaries⁷⁶ and no qualifications for rendering a decision on whether Turkey’s offshore activities are illegal or not. Its insistence on helping solve this problem in fact makes it worse.

74 John B. Alterman et al., “Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor”, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/restoring-eastern-mediterranean-us-strategic-anchor>, (Date of Accession: 17.02.2021).

75 Erol, *loc.cit.*

76 As per the Court of Justice of the European Union declaration dated 31 January 2020 and with the case number: C-457/18 Slovenia v Croatia, regarding those two countries’ dispute over their maritime border, “*The Grand Chamber of the Court Has Declared That It Lacks Jurisdiction to Rule on the Action Brought by Slovenia*”.

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In the absence of a diplomatic breakthrough, tensions between Turkey and Greece over maritime jurisdiction are escalating. The conflicting parties were moving in a militaristic direction in the wake of growing tensions over gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Technical meetings on deconfliction procedures to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents between Turkey and Greece, and opening reconnaissance survey talks between the two countries, can be a start toward finding a solution, but it is not likely in the short or middle term to produce a full agreement on these decades-long disputes. Moreover, the same day these talks started, Greece and France signed a deal for the purchase of 18 Rafale fighter jets and last but not the least, Greek and Turkish sides are not on the same page about topics to be discussed. These early signs lead us not much to expect from these talks.

A regional conference (if it happens) held with the participation of all littoral Mediterranean countries and nations with the companies operating in the area, as proposed by Turkey,⁷⁷ should be organized with equal representation from the two sides of Cyprus and no *fait accompli* to be disallowed by the EU.

There are ways in which Turkey can overcome these problems. They include: making every effort to negotiate EEZ delimitation treaties with Egypt⁷⁸ (one has been signed already between Greece and Egypt), Israel⁷⁹, Lebanon (its treaty with Greece is not yet ratified) and Syria. This is the course of action also recommended in UNCLOS for neighboring countries (i.e., to solve disputes through diplomatic channels⁸⁰) but because it is not

77 Kardelen Yılmaz, "Doğu Akdeniz Çalıştayı Başladı", *Denizcilik*, <http://www.denizcilikdergisi.com/denizcilik-gundem-haberleri/dogu-akdeniz-calistayi-basladi/>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

78 "Doğu Akdeniz Çalıştayı-Akdeniz Üniversitesi (2. Oturum)", *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpKzOTsk4Wk>, (Date of Accession: 16.02.2021).

79 An article discussing the possibility of signing a new maritime delimitation agreement between Turkey and Israel written by Retired Admiral Associate Prof. Cihat Yaycı and Zeynep Ceyhan from Bahçeşehir University was published on "The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies" on 07 December 2020.

80 Turkey's being a non-signatory state to UNCLOS cannot prevent referring it because Turkey internalized some practices of the convention as a common law in the course of time.

binding, Turkey can unilaterally declare this by notifying the UN. Moreover, an EEZ treaty made with the TRNC would give Turkey more privileges on the continental shelf.

Although Turkish-Israeli relations deteriorated after 2009 because of opposing political stances, and Turkey-Egypt relations shrank to a minimum, today there is a slight progress especially between Turkey-Egypt relations. And there is room for back-door diplomacy with Israel.

There are other options if diplomacy fails, depending on the evolution of the crisis. One of it is, to deploy controversial S-400 Air Defense Systems close to the region and activating them. And the other one is, -if the EU sanctions start- Turkey has a right to make vessels enter Turkish Straits by day, make the transit through the routes indicated by the Turkish authorities and can make pilotage obligatory, as per Article-6 of the Montreux Convention, which will slow down the maritime traffic. Moreover, the passage of warships shall be left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government, should Turkey consider itself to be threatened with imminent danger of war, as per Articles of 20 and 21 of Montreux Convention.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

The crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean is generally seen as Turkish vs. Greek but is in truth much more than that. The fact that the conflict centers on Turkey and Greece, two allies of the West, causes it to be seen as a problem internal to the West and hence one that excludes foreign actors. But from within these foreign actors, EU's effort to diversify its natural resources, America and China's's struggle for control of the waterways in the region and Russia's drive to expand in the Eastern

81 "Doğu Akdeniz Konusunda En Çarpıcı Açıklamayı Emekli Tümamiral Cihat Yaycı Yaptı, AB Türkiye'ye Yaptırım Uygularsa Ne Olur?", *Yeniçağ*, 19 September 2020.

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Mediterranean are covered activities in the background.

Moreover, an area representing 0.7% of the global ocean surface has now evolved into one in which strategic interests may turn into armed conflict. In the beginning, it started as a Turkish-Greek dispute over maritime jurisdiction but then, thanks to French intervention, it turned into a Turkey-EU problem. Then, with the NATO Secretary General's efforts to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents between two NATO allies, the NATO dimension was added. The U.S. also took part in the crisis, especially after it showed its true colors by lifting its GASC arms embargo.

From the point of view of Turkey and other actors' point of view, the problem in the Eastern Mediterranean is not just one of jurisdiction or energy but also one of sovereignty. In spite of a key actor, excluding Turkey from the process is a policy of soft containment, and a solution without Turkey is not viable. The inconveniencing of this containment could lead to the Eastern Mediterranean into a dangerous escalation spiral that could permanently alter Turkey's relationship with the West and create a significant break either in NATO's southern flank or in the Eastern Mediterranean, which controls the center of Eurasia.

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