

# Sea Changes: U.S. Challenges and Opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean



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# Executive Summary

The Eastern Mediterranean is rapidly reemerging as a geopolitical flashpoint after a sustained period of relative calm. Historically, the region's vital position at the nexus of Europe, Asia and Africa made it an epicenter of great power competition and a cauldron of conflict. The Eastern Mediterranean also marked the spot where the United States began pushing back against the spread of communist influence at the outset of the Cold War, and it remained a focus of U.S. grand strategy until the collapse of the Soviet Union. But since then the United States has turned to problems elsewhere, and its bureaucratic stovepipes hinder sustained or coherent strategic attention to the region.

Now, remarkable geopolitical realignments are underway across the Eastern Mediterranean that require America's renewed attention. This initial report from JINSA's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project is intended as a capstone laying out these changes and their implications for U.S. interests and regional stability. Follow-on reports will explore several key individual issues in greater depth and provide detailed recommendations for U.S. policy.

The first major catalyst of regional change is the profound transformation of Turkey's strategic posture under President Erdoğan. Turkey has moved from a reliable NATO member to an unpredictable ally whose increasingly Islamo-nationalist foreign policy and gunboat diplomacy put it at odds with traditional partners, particularly the United States and Europe, as well as Israel and Egypt. The ongoing crisis over Ankara's acquisition of advanced S-400 air defenses from Moscow is the latest indication of Turkey's turning away from its traditional roles as a pro-Western bulwark on NATO's southeastern flank and a bridge between Europe and the Middle East.

Second, Iranian and Russian efforts to gain footholds in the region have brought with them the return of high-stakes geopolitical rivalry more commonly associated with Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific. These footholds also pose new threats to U.S. allies in the region. This includes Iran's military and political influence in Syria and – through Hezbollah – in Lebanon, as well as Russia's military bases and advanced air defenses along the Syrian coast. Coming at a time when U.S. regional presence has diminished, for the first time since the end of the Cold War American planners can no longer assume the area is an uncontested operating environment.

Third, the Eastern Mediterranean is home to the largest hydrocarbon discoveries of the past decade, with prospects for significant additional findings. However, many regional actors have competing territorial claims to these valuable resources, adding considerably to the stakes involved in the region and compounding the risk of conflict.

Fourth, as it has been for millennia, the region is also the primary thoroughfare for populations moving between the three adjoining continents. Driven in recent years by refugees from conflict in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa, as well as by economic problems, the Eastern Mediterranean is once again the main artery for mass migration from the Middle East and Africa into Europe. Islamic State and other terrorist groups have exploited this exodus to launch attacks throughout Western Europe, exacerbating political challenges that already confront the European Union in addressing the influx of refugees.

Combined, these developments create new strategic opportunities for the United States, but also potential hotspots which could once again destabilize the region and make it resemble the currently tense environment in the East and South China Seas. Indeed, conflict could break out over competing energy claims or any number of political disputes, which in turn could deepen tensions over those same energy claims.

One especially concerning scenario is a major Israel-Iran conflict, as Tehran continues its efforts to entrench militarily in Syria and Israel continues trying to roll back these attempts. Escalation between Iran and Israel could encompass Lebanon as well, where Hezbollah sits on more than 120,000 rockets and advanced missiles, including anti-ship capabilities that could target maritime traffic, ports and offshore energy infrastructure.

A second possibility is a crisis triggered by Turkey's increasingly aggressive behavior toward its neighbors, particularly Greece and Cyprus, and by its increasingly aggressive rhetoric toward Egypt and Israel. Relatedly, the lack of agreed exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean, combined with the significant energy riches beneath them, could lead the current standoff between Turkey and any of its neighbors to get out of hand – as could the lack of an agreed maritime boundary between Israel and Lebanon.

All these potential hotspots are exacerbated by a regionwide military buildup. While the United States has recently moved to reassert its own military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, its regional force posture is a shadow of its former self. Regional powers are moving to fill the void, creating growing instability.

These unfolding changes also create opportunities for the United States. Many regional actors are turning to America for support in an increasingly challenging environment. Greece has invested strongly in NATO and in its bilateral relationship with the United States. Shared interests in developing energy resources and containing Turkey are driving increasingly close alignment – and growing willingness to shoulder the burdens of regional defense – among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt. With U.S. leadership, these new partnerships could help anchor regional stability and weaken Turkish, Iranian and Russian influence. There is also potential to expand this embryonic cooperation to include other regional actors like Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

While the United States has taken steps to endorse such cooperation, it has yet to determine how to handle relations with Turkey, an issue on which there is considerable disarray in Washington. This reflects a broader uncertainty, even among American policymakers, about U.S. intentions and level of commitment in the Eastern Mediterranean. Under the Obama Administration, there was a palpable sense the United States was leaving the region to its own affairs. Conflicting signals about America's level of interest endure under the Trump Administration.

Looking ahead, the Eastern Mediterranean must again command U.S. attention and resources to address the region's high potential for conflict and cooperation. Indeed, to an even greater extent than during the Cold War, the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial to the growing great power competition identified by the most recent U.S. national security and defense strategies as the chief threat to the United States. In addition to its renewed importance as NATO's southern bulwark against Russian expansion and Middle East instability, and given its sizable underwater resources, the region could either promote energy security or become the crucible

for contesting freedom of the seas and other pillars of the U.S.-led international order.

The increasingly high stakes and uncertainty surrounding the future of the Eastern Mediterranean means the United States must treat the region as a coherent strategic entity – something that will be impossible unless the national security bureaucracy addresses the organizational divisions currently splitting up the region.

Follow-on reports from this group will provide detailed policy recommendations on discrete regional security issues, but first and foremost American policymakers must make abundantly clear to allies and adversaries alike that the Eastern Mediterranean is back as a critical focus for U.S. grand strategy.

# Strategic Backgrounder

## *Historical Crossroads of Competition*

The Eastern Mediterranean has been a pivotal crossroads and a cauldron of conflict since antiquity, long before the discovery of abundant hydrocarbon resources. As part of the “sea between the lands,” it is the geographical and strategic nexus of Europe, Asia and Africa. It stretches from the heel tip of Italy eastward to the Levant to encompass Greece, Turkey, Syria, Israel, Egypt and Libya, also incorporating the surrounding periphery and key islands like Cyprus and Crete.

This vital strategic position has made the Eastern Mediterranean an epicenter of great power competition for millennia. With the notable exceptions of *Pax Romana* and *Pax Ottomana*, when one power dominated the entire area, these crisscrossing spheres of influence have brought major instability and recurrent conflict since at least the Greco-Persian wars 2,500 years ago.

The region’s modern history as a geopolitical flashpoint began with the growing Anglo-Russian rivalry of the nineteenth century, and more recently the Cold War-era superpower standoff. Russia’s defeats of the Ottoman Empire before and after the Napoleonic Wars raised for the tsars the long-coveted prospect of securing warm water ports along the Bosphorus which would grant access to the Eastern Mediterranean and, ipso facto, the rest of the world. As British Admiral Horatio Nelson stated in 1799, “the Russians seem more bent on taking ports in the Mediterranean than in destroying Bonaparte in Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

By the 1850s, this brought St. Petersburg into direct conflict with the British Empire, which used the Ottomans as an Eastern Mediterranean buffer to protect its routes to India.<sup>2</sup> The Suez Canal’s completion shortly thereafter only heightened the region’s geostrategic importance, in the process sharpening Anglo-Russian rivalry. The two set aside their differences over the region in 1907, but only amid the rising shared threat from Imperial Germany – including Berlin’s own growing influence in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its bid to become a global empire.

Both world wars broke out far from, and for reasons not directly related to, the Eastern Mediterranean, but the region’s location and resources quickly brought those wars to it. Before or during World War I every great power except the United States committed military forces to the theater. Similarly, World War II promptly found its way to the region as Italy and subsequently Germany sought to sever Britain from its empire and, in the case of Germany, threaten the Soviet Union from the south.

## *America’s First Steps as a Superpower*

It seems only fitting that the Eastern Mediterranean was where the United States began to confront the Soviet Union. In 1946, the United States took the fairly unprecedented step (for itself, at least) of sending a naval task force into the region, amid Moscow’s attempts to secure bases in the Mediterranean and pressure Turkey to allow uninhibited passage of Soviet ships into the Aegean Sea.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, the famous “Truman Doctrine” speech by the president to Congress in 1947 announced military and economic assistance to Turkey and



Greece as the centerpiece of a broader commitment to defend the free world and contain the communist bloc.

In the run-up to this speech, George Marshall underscored the region's geostrategic importance in one of his first statements as secretary of state by warning if Greece and Turkey fell, "we are faced with the first crisis of a series which might extend Soviet domination to Europe, the Middle East and Asia."<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on the situation in his memoirs, Marshall's successor Dean Acheson noted "a highly possible Soviet breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration.... These were the stakes that British withdrawal from the eastern Mediterranean offered to an eager and ruthless opponent."<sup>5</sup>

The Eastern Mediterranean thus became a focal point for U.S. grand strategy in the Cold War. In 1950, the U.S. Navy officially stood up the Sixth Fleet to maintain a permanent U.S. force presence in the region. Two years later, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) established a dedicated military command for the Mediterranean and expanded southeastward to include Greece and Turkey, despite longstanding preexisting tensions between these two new allies. This southern flank remained a crucial bulwark against the Soviet Union, which the United States sought to reinforce with major NATO maritime exercises and by developing ties with regional actors like Israel and Egypt.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States and its allies mostly enjoyed clear military superiority over the Soviet Union in the region, which was routinely referred to as "a NATO lake."<sup>6</sup> A 1968 *Foreign Affairs* analysis noted:

"The Soviet Union now has a navy of some 45 ships in the Mediterranean.... In mere numbers it may be compared with the 50 to 60 ships in the U.S. Sixth Fleet. But it has nothing to compare with the two powerful American aircraft carriers, each with 100 strike aircraft, or with the Polaris submarines.... Above all, the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean still lacks any kind of sustained air cover, having neither an aircraft carrier nor an airfield sufficiently near."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the biggest crises for the United States in the region concerned its allies in the 1956 Suez Crisis, and those of regional powers in the Arab-Israeli conflicts. Moscow did establish military ties with Egypt, Syria and Libya, though Israeli military defeats of Egypt and Syria in 1967 and 1973, and U.S. diplomacy, led the United States to become the dominant superpower in the region by the late 1970s. In the 1980s, Moscow watched from the sidelines as U.S. forces repeatedly dispatched Libya's Soviet-supplied warships and fighter planes in a series of sharp engagements.

### *Diminished U.S. Regional Presence*

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 prompted the dissolution of its Mediterranean fleet and its departure from bases in Syria and the Red Sea. Even as these moves confirmed U.S. regional predominance, the United States drew down its global force posture and cut defense spending as part of a peace dividend from the end of superpower confrontation. In 2000, the area of responsibility (AOR) for U.S. European Command's maritime forces expanded to include much of the eastern Atlantic and most of Africa, diminishing the ability of an already-reduced fleet to sustain its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Simultaneous disinvestment in naval forces by other NATO members worsened the trend of reduced Western capability in

the region. Moreover, throughout the 1990s and 2000s the United States deployed forces to address more pressing crises in the Persian Gulf, Balkans and Horn of Africa. Regional actors including Egypt, Israel, Syria and Jordan likewise dealt with competing priorities, whether domestic instability or peace negotiations.

### *Bureaucratic Obstacles*

As it does today, U.S. bureaucracy further complicated efforts to develop a coherent strategic approach to the region. Similar to the competing spheres of influence that fissured the region for centuries, divisions within U.S. foreign policy and defense agencies cut right across the Eastern Mediterranean. The State Department splits the area between its European and Near Eastern bureaus, while the Defense Department (DOD) splits it between European, Central and African commands. Though driven largely by political sensibilities, these divisions also mean each bureau or command treats its share of the region in a different geographic context incorporating disparate countries and issues. For example Israel is grouped under the same DOD command as Scandinavia but not Egypt or Jordan. The two departments' respective boundaries often cut across one another as well, for example Libya and Egypt, or Israel and Greece, being lumped together by one department but separated by the other.

# New Regional Dynamics

Even as U.S. attention pivoted elsewhere, over the past decade the Eastern Mediterranean has undergone its biggest geopolitical shift since the Cold War. As recently as 2002, the main security axis in the region was the strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel, which had expanded rapidly since the mid-1990s. Supported by the United States, this alignment mainly targeted Syria, viewed by both Ankara and Jerusalem as a key security threat. By contrast, Greece's relations with Turkey and Israel verged on hostile, and its close ties with Serbia created considerable friction in Athens' relations with NATO and the United States in the Kosovo War (1998-99). During this period there was no serious Iranian or Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, the situation could not be more different. Turkey now opposes many American interests in the region, and its strategic relationship with Israel is no more. Instead, Turkey has developed a cautious arrangement of sorts with Iran and Russia, and its relations with both Greece and Egypt are tense. Meanwhile, informal alignments of interests have emerged among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, and which appear to enjoy tacit American support. Recently, Greece has invested strongly in NATO and in its bilateral relationship with the United States.

Several key factors have contributed to this remarkable shift, most momentously the transformation of Turkey's strategic posture from a reliable NATO member to an unpredictable ally at odds with traditional partners and U.S. interests. Another driver has been the return of geopolitical competition through Iranian and Russian entrenchment in the Levant. The discovery of significant natural gas resources, and competing territorial claims to these resources, have added considerably to the stakes involved in the region. Additionally, the recent eruption of mass migration from the Middle East and Africa into Europe flowed straight through the Eastern Mediterranean. This has sharpened political divisions between regional actors and exported terrorism – and with it instability – to Europe.

## *Turkey's Transformation*

The change of Turkey's strategic posture is the key shift affecting the strategic balance and rising security competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. Prior to the mid-2000s, Turkey was a reliable NATO ally, though one beset by democratic deficiencies – in particular, the military's influence over politics and the methods used to fight Kurdish insurgents in the country's southeast. But aside from fringe Islamist groups, there was consensus in Turkey's political leadership over the country's western orientation, the key role of NATO and the ambition to join the European Union (EU).

The arrival to power of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2002 did not at first change this situation. But since the AKP won re-election and secured the presidency in 2007, and especially since the Arab upheavals began in 2011, Turkey has become more Islamist and authoritarian, altering its geopolitical priorities and taking positions that depart considerably from the past. Its foreign policy now tends to be more adventurist, with a clear penchant for embracing Islamist forces and leaders, particularly those forming part of the Muslim Brotherhood ("The Brotherhood," or MB) network. This stems

in great part from the AKP's ideological heritage, as the Brotherhood strongly influenced the Turkish Islamist movement.<sup>8</sup>

The embrace of Islamist causes began already in the AKP's first term. This includes its affinity for Hamas – effectively the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch – and Erdoğan's defense of Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, whose country is designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States. By 2009, Turkey also emerged as a chief defender of Iran's nuclear program in the U.N Security Council.

Erdoğan then took the 2011 Arab upheavals as an opportunity to establish Turkish influence across the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard. The Brotherhood was the vehicle of choice. Turkey endorsed the Brotherhood's bids for power in Egypt and Syria, and the closely related Ennahda party in Tunisia. When the Brotherhood failed to emerge as a credible force in Syria, Ankara supported more radical groups there, and initially turned a blind eye to Islamic State's use of Turkey as a staging ground for its fighting in Syria and Iraq. There is also strong evidence for Turkey's endorsement of Islamist militias in the Libyan civil war. When Qatar expelled senior Brotherhood leaders in 2014, Turkey welcomed them, evolving into the organization's global base.

While Turkey's new foreign policy hardly yielded the intended results, it negatively impacted relations with other regional states – most importantly Israel. Erdoğan quickly endorsed Hamas following the 2006 Palestinian elections, a harbinger of hardening Turkish attitudes toward Israel that culminated in Ankara's endorsement of the flotilla intending to break the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza in 2010. The following year Turkey suspended military agreements and planned defense procurements from Israel. Meanwhile, anti-Semitic themes gained widespread airtime in Turkish media. Following the 2013 Gezi Park protests against Erdoğan's policies (among other grievances), Turkish leaders began routinely to blame the unrest and Turkey's growing economic woes on anti-Semitic conspiracies. A tenuous normalization agreement was signed in 2016, but Turkey again withdrew its ambassador from Israel following the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2018.

Turkey's relationship with Egypt has also soured. Erdoğan's support for the Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi cost Turkey over \$2 billion in investments and earned the enmity of new president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The two countries then downgraded diplomatic relations as Erdoğan blamed Morsi's removal on Israel and repeatedly slammed el-Sisi as an "illegitimate tyrant."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Turkey's endorsement of the Egyptian Brotherhood drove a severe downturn in its relations with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), who saw the Brotherhood's bid for power across the region as an existential threat and thus viewed Turkey much the same way as they do Qatar.

Erdoğan's foreign policy failures did not temper his ambitions, but domestic politics compelled him to channel these ambitions in a more nationalist direction. While still supporting the Brotherhood, AKP electoral losses in 2015 forced Erdoğan to allow Turkey's far-right nationalist movement a greater say over national security. Because both Erdoğan and the nationalists suspect the United States of endorsing the failed July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the new nationalist direction is also very anti-American. This has prompted greater Turkish efforts toward self-reliance, as well as moves to balance U.S. influence by improving ties with Russia and Iran. The ongoing crisis over Ankara's acquisition of advanced S-400 air defenses from Moscow is a microcosm of Turkey's turning away from its traditional role as a pro-Western

bulwark on NATO's southeastern flank and a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Turkey also continues to deepen its relationship with Qatar, as it deploys a military base there, along with military outposts along the Horn of Africa.

Increased hostility toward Israel and the United States – traditionally important defense suppliers – has accelerated Turkey's longstanding efforts to develop a cutting-edge indigenous defense industry. This is fueled by a 65 percent growth in military expenditures from 2009 to 2018.<sup>10</sup> While only 20 percent of Turkey's military procurement was domestic in 2003, the figure is now over 60 percent, and Turkey's foreign defense sales are now over \$2 billion per year.<sup>11</sup> This is a far cry from the stated goal of reaching \$25 billion in annual sales, but indicates a long-term ambition to establish Turkey among the second tier of world defense exporters.<sup>12</sup>

The Turkish Navy is front and center of this procurement spree. According to Ryan Gingeras, this “represents an acute example of ... a worldview that increasingly paints the United States as a rival, and at times an adversary, in the path to Turkey's ascendancy on the global stage.”<sup>13</sup> The country will have its first aircraft carrier by 2020, and is scheduled to launch 24 new ships by 2023. Given the controversy over the territorial boundaries of natural gas exploration, this naval buildup has important regional implications.

Finally, Turkey's strategic posture recently has reflected a grudging acceptance of Russian and Iranian primacy in the Levant. Erdoğan supported efforts to overthrow the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, putting him at odds with Iran and Russia. With the latter, the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter plane in November 2015 led to a six-month deep freeze in relations that ended with an apparent Turkish apology just before the July 2016 attempted coup.

But the main Turkish concern was always Syrian Kurds' effort to establish a state-like entity on the Turkish border. Thus, Turkey strongly opposed U.S. cooperation with Syrian Kurds against Islamic State. Given the conspiratorial anti-Americanism prevalent in Turkey today, leading Turkish officials – including Erdoğan – appear to view U.S. policy as part and parcel of an effort to contain Turkey and undermine his regime. Therefore, following the failed 2016 coup, Ankara put aside its differences with Moscow and Tehran and essentially indicated it prefers a junior role in the Russian-Iranian axis in Syria to partnership with the United States.

Growing nationalism may also be behind Turkey's growing assertiveness in the Aegean Sea. Ankara and Athens have sparred over the issue for decades, but since 2017 Turkish air and naval encroachments on Greek airspace and waters have increased noticeably. This is reminiscent of the 1990s, another period of nationalist ascendancy in Turkey, when the tensions in the Aegean almost spiraled into an armed confrontation.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, similar to Beijing in the South China Sea, Ankara claims its entire continental shelf as part of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), rather than the 12-nautical-mile limit recognized by international law. This means its expansive self-proclaimed EEZ intrudes extensively on the more modest territorial claims of Cyprus and Greece, in turn complicating and raising the stakes of preexisting political fault lines between Greek and Turkish Cyprus. These factors also have prompted Ankara to object to unilateral Greek Cypriot drilling for oil and natural gas in waters off Cyprus, arguing that any energy discoveries belong equally to Turkish Cypriots.

In 2018, Turkish warships physically blocked a drillship operated by Italy's ENI from accessing a well location southeast of the island claimed by Turkey as part of its EEZ, forcing ENI to suspend drilling there.<sup>15</sup> Turkey also objected later that year to U.S.-based ExxonMobil's drilling much further south from the island, but did not intervene.<sup>16</sup> In spring 2019, Turkey moved to the offensive, sending its newly commissioned drillship *Fatih* to an area off the western coast of Cyprus claimed by the Cypriot government, but not by Turkey as part of its own EEZ. This led to a spat with EU and U.S. officials, who condemned Turkey's move as destabilizing and illegal, with the EU imposing sanctions on Turkey as a result.<sup>17</sup>

There is reason to believe a change in Turkish leadership could dramatically alter these policies, in light of widespread uneasiness about them among Turks. Given Erdoğan's power and the current likelihood he will be in office several more years, however, the United States has no choice but to treat these policies as enduring, while perhaps leaving the door open as possible to the potential emergence of more accommodating Turkish leaders in the future.

### *Return of Geopolitical Competition*

Turkey's changing stance, and its implications for regional security, is exacerbated by the entrenchment of Iran and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Iran's expanding presence began long before the Syria conflict. It benefited from its support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad forces in Damascus, but more importantly from the growing role of its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanese politics. Tehran reinforced this by equipping Hezbollah with tens of thousands of unguided rockets and precision long-range missiles – including anti-ship cruise missiles to target maritime traffic, ports and offshore energy infrastructure. Iran thereby accumulated pivotal influence over a strategic country on Israel's border, as part of an overarching plan to consolidate a "land bridge" stretching from its own borders through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.

This gradually generated a proxy war as Iranian-supported groups sought to exploit the Syrian civil war to establish a second front against Israel and transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah. Since 2017, this has forced Israel to retaliate through a sustained air campaign.<sup>18</sup> Western powers, committed to the nuclear deal with Iran, did little to counter this Iranian expansionism, though this began to change under the Trump Administration. Tehran's deepening influence over Beirut has also made Lebanon into a bigger venue for regional competition with the United States, given Washington's efforts to cultivate more moderate political and military forces in the country as counterweights to Hezbollah.

Iran's role in Syria and Lebanon is complemented by Russia's involvement in the region beyond anything it enjoyed in the Cold War. In 2013, after a two-decade hiatus, Moscow reactivated its Fifth Eskadra under the new guise of the "Operational Formation of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea." Against the background of America's refusal to intervene against the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in 2013, Russia identified a geopolitical vacuum that it filled by deploying military forces to Syria in 2015.

In 2017, Russia made its military presence in Syria permanent through long-term leases at the Hmeimim air base and the Tartus naval base.<sup>19</sup> Moscow clarified its long-term intentions by deploying advanced air defense systems across Syria and on sea-based platforms, including S-300 and S-400 batteries. In this sense Russia essentially has taken over Syria's

airspace, and potentially acquired air superiority over a significant swath of the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's onboarding of its own S-400 capabilities raises the risk of a NATO ally becoming directly incorporated into, and broadening the reach of, Moscow's anti-access area denial (A2/AD) envelope.<sup>20</sup> Russia is also using the region to demonstrate its power projection capabilities, including by firing long-range cruise missiles into Syria from the Eastern Mediterranean and Caspian Seas.<sup>21</sup>

Driven by internal dynamics separate from Syria or Lebanon, the ongoing and increasingly violent civil war in Libya nevertheless is turning that country into another hotspot for great power and regional competition. Turkey backs the U.N.-recognized unity government in Tripoli, including by supplying weapons to government forces, against the self-styled Libyan National Army backed by Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Beyond the threats this poses in terms of energy security – given Libya's oil resources – and additional refugee exoduses to Europe, the proxy conflict there also compounds the risks of broader regional instability.

The Eastern Mediterranean is also attracting Beijing's interest. Thus far, China's presence is visible chiefly through its acquisition of controlling stakes in the ports of Piraeus in Greece and Haifa in Israel, but also by the creation of the "16+1" mechanism through which China has established a dialogue platform with southeast European countries, something that has rankled EU feathers. China has also sought increased influence in Turkey, not least by following Russia in promising support for Erdoğan after the 2016 coup attempt. However, for a period of time China's internment of hundreds of thousands of Turkic Uyghurs in re-education camps prompted considerable Turkish criticism.<sup>22</sup>

## *Energy Discoveries*

The discovery of major energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean – combined, the world's biggest hydrocarbon discoveries of the past decade – and the still-disputed EEZs that crisscross the region have only compounded these growing geopolitical tensions and raised the stakes involved.<sup>23</sup> The importance for U.S. interests is reinforced by the critical role of American energy companies in discovering and exploiting these resources.

The center of activity is where the EEZs of Israel, Egypt and Cyprus meet. Egypt's sector is the most developed, with the Zohr natural gas field, estimated at 30 trillion cubic feet (tcf), discovered in 2015. It was developed extremely rapidly, beginning to deliver gas in late 2017. Production from this field made Egypt self-sufficient in natural gas for the first time in years, and as production increases, it will free up export capacity.<sup>24</sup> Israel has the Leviathan and Tamar gas fields, estimated to hold 21 and 7 tcf, respectively. Cyprus' Aphrodite field, under development by U.S.-based Noble Energy, is also estimated at 7 tcf. In 2018, ENI announced the discovery of the Calypso field offshore Cyprus, estimated to hold 6-8 tcf; soon thereafter, Exxon shared news of finding an additional 5-8 tcf.<sup>25</sup> Many concession blocks have yet to be explored, and Lebanese and Syrian waters have not seen any significant drilling to date. Lebanon and Israel have yet to resolve their EEZ dispute, and there is a real possibility Syria – whose own EEZ boundaries are contested – could try exploring for offshore energy resources to fund the country's massive reconstruction bill.

When Israel discovered Leviathan, there was considerable hope this could strengthen relations with Turkey, as Turkey has long sought to become an energy hub for Europe. The development of the Trans-Anatolian pipeline (TANAP) carrying Azerbaijani gas to Europe

raised the possibility that Israeli gas could be piped to Turkey to join TANAP. Following the normalization of relations in 2016, both Israeli and Turkish officials raised this possibility.<sup>26</sup> But Turkey's assertively anti-Israel diplomatic stance has likely ended these hopes, causing Israelis to question the wisdom of using Turkey as their energy conduit to Europe.

Instead, in 2019 Israel agreed to export gas to Egypt while it continues to explore the possibility of a 1,300-mile undersea Eastern Med Pipeline that would cross Cyprus and Greece and end in Italy.<sup>27</sup> Both options to route supplies around Turkey would still support U.S. and EU policy to reduce European dependence on Russian energy.

Indeed, to Turkey's chagrin, Egypt's preexisting liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure is enabling its emergence as the region's nascent natural gas hub at the direct expense of Turkey.<sup>28</sup> In January 2019, a number of regional states met in Cairo to set up the "Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum" which aims to create a regional gas market among Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority – but conspicuously not Turkey.<sup>29</sup> While perhaps unsurprising, given Ankara's hostile relations with most participants, it shows the growing fault line between Turkey and regional natural gas producers.

## *Mass Migration*

A fourth factor is the recent eruption of mass migration from the Middle East and Africa into Europe. Driven by refugees from conflict in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, as well as economic migrants from Africa and elsewhere, the Eastern Mediterranean once again became a major crossing point between continents. Since 2014, more than two million refugees and migrants entered the European Union through the Mediterranean and Turkey, mostly fleeing Syria and other Middle East conflicts (compared to less than 400,000 over the same period prior to 2014).<sup>30</sup>

Islamic State and other terrorist groups have exploited this efflux to launch attacks throughout Western Europe, exacerbating political challenges that already confront the European Union in addressing the refugee issue. Though outflows from the Middle East have fallen appreciably since 2016, the significant potential for further conflict and other instability around the Eastern Mediterranean carries with it the possibility of renewed major refugee movements both within the region and into Europe.



# Geopolitical Realignments in the Eastern Mediterranean: Opportunities for America or Cauldron of Conflict?

The developments outlined in this paper pose serious challenges to U.S. interests, but also provide a series of opportunities for U.S. policy going forward.

Much like the East and South China Seas, the Eastern Mediterranean is once again part and parcel of great power competition, which the U.S. National Security Council and Defense Department have both determined to be the chief challenge facing U.S. national security in coming years. The region involves three key Eurasian powers directly: two U.S. adversaries – Russia and Iran – as well as Turkey, formally an ally, but behaving less and less like one. While America's most crucial issues with these three powers may not be in the Eastern Mediterranean, the region plays into all three relationships, and into America's relations with key partners like Israel and Egypt.

Furthermore, regional developments support Robert Kaplan's argument that international law or formalized norms of behavior no longer constrain Eurasia's great powers. Thus, Iran has advanced to the Mediterranean through its subversive interventions, including by proxy, in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Russia has established its presence in Syria in a manner that is technically legal, but highly controversial, and Turkey is gambling that no one will intervene to stop its gunboat diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As a result, the Eastern Mediterranean combines regional and great power competition layered upon each other, again like the East and South China Seas. Indeed, Russia's naval presence combined with Turkey's naval buildup and troubled Turkish-American relations means the U.S. Navy can no longer take for granted its strategic superiority in the region, nor assume the Eastern Mediterranean is an uncontested operating environment.

At the same time, the novelty of the region's emerging geopolitical realignment means relations among local actors are not set; as they jockey for influence, tensions can lead to conflict either by accident or by design. As seen recently in the Persian Gulf, sudden tests of U.S. resolve can take place at unanticipated moments. In an environment where Russia is challenging U.S. and NATO interests in southeastern Europe, Turkey and Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean could easily become a cauldron of conflict once again.

Several interrelated existing and potential hotspots should concern U.S. policymakers and defense planners:

- *Major Israel-Iran conflict:* thus far the United States and Europe have taken Iran's advance to Israel's Syrian border in stride, perhaps assuming Israel can handle its own defense. Still, the low-intensity military conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria could escalate as Tehran continues its efforts to entrench militarily in the country and Israel continues seeking to roll back these attempts. The two also could end up in direct major conflict if war breaks out between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, or as part of

retaliation for the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against Iran. Assuming Hezbollah becomes involved, such conflict could pose real risks to shipping lanes, ports and offshore energy infrastructure.

- *Turkish aggression:* Turkey's increasingly assertive military posture creates challenges of its own. The most salient risks concern Greece and Cyprus, as Ankara has methodically increased its challenge to the status quo in the air and sea around the Aegean Sea, and most dramatically in the waters surrounding Cyprus. Turkey's air force is a particular concern for an escalatory spiral. As the service branch most deeply involved in the 2016 failed coup, it has seen the deepest purges and thus the sharpest plunge in professionalism and corresponding rise in risky behaviors. Consequently, a serious escalation between two NATO members resulting from an air accident or miscalculation cannot be ruled out – all at a time when U.S. leverage over Turkey is considerably lower than it was during the last such crisis in 1996. Similarly, if Ankara feels emboldened by its gunboat diplomacy and growing naval muscle, a confrontation over disputed waters surrounding Cyprus is easily imaginable. Either eventuality also raises the risks of serious Turkish-Egyptian tensions and even conflict, given Cairo's wariness of Ankara's support for the Brotherhood around the region and the threats Turkey poses to Egypt becoming an energy hub.
- *EEZ disputes:* even as abundant new energy resources are being explored and discovered, many regional boundaries offshore remain uncertain. Beyond the Turkey-Cyprus controversy, Syrian and Lebanese EEZs are not delimited, and Egypt recently made clear it views Turkish EEZ claims against Cyprus with alarm. Indeed, ongoing energy discoveries – and competition to become the regional hub for exporting them – are aggravating pre-existing ideological and political fissures between Cairo and Ankara. And while Cyprus, Israel and Egypt appear to have a cooperative approach to dealing with their respective boundaries, the lack of complete delimitation could trigger any number of future controversies, particularly if significant energy resources are discovered near presumptive boundary lines. As the Caspian Sea shows, in such situations gunboat diplomacy becomes an easy tool to prevent rivals from developing contested energy resources.
- *Regional arms race:* all the above risks are exacerbated by a regionwide military buildup. Turkey, Russia, Israel and Egypt are expanding their naval forces and bases, and given the resources, so would Greece. Amid the expected development of major undersea energy infrastructure, the potential proliferation of relatively cheap unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) technology would only intensify the destabilizing effects of this naval arms race already underway, which thus far focuses on surface vessels and submarines. In the meantime, the United States' overall regional force posture is a shadow of its former self, even factoring in recent moves to reassert its own military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Consequently, regional powers are moving to fill the void, bringing growing instability with them.

Meanwhile, there are also silver linings for the United States, but they will force American policymakers to walk a tightrope. Most importantly, deepening energy cooperation among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt is already leading to cooperation in other fields, most importantly regional security and joint military exercises. While Israel and Egypt are highly unlikely to form an overt alliance anytime soon, it is clear their interests are aligning in an

increasingly stable manner. Cooperating on energy infrastructure will tie future leaders of these states closer together, as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline did for Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, Israel-Egypt cooperation is implicitly supported by Jordan, and backed by Gulf powers such as Saudi Arabia and UAE that oppose Iran and Turkey.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's decision to attend a March 2019 trilateral meeting on regional and energy security between Israel, Greece and Cyprus constitutes the most overt indication yet of U.S. policy toward the region's geopolitical realignment. But the U.S. government is divided internally on the issue, primarily because it has yet to come to terms with the question how to deal with Turkey. American military leadership is invested heavily in the relationship with Turkey and is reluctant to take steps that may push it further toward Russia and Iran. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford stated in March 2019, "Turkey's an ally, a very important ally, and we have many more areas of convergence than divergence ... as we look at five, 10 years down the road, I want to make very sure that our Turkish allies are close to us."<sup>31</sup>

The U.S. Senate and other parts of government consider Turkey already to be lost, and/or that decisive action is needed to pressure Turkey to stop ignoring U.S. and NATO interests with impunity. In this context, lending support to quadrilateral cooperation among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt is one possible element in a strategy to contain Turkey, but it may also further escalate tensions with Ankara.

For regional powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, however, U.S. intentions are an important variable on which there is little clarity. Erdoğan seems to bet his personal relationship with Trump can outweigh the alarm felt within the U.S. national security establishment. Conversely, Greece, Cyprus and Egypt are appealing for U.S. support, as is Israel, but meanwhile building their own capabilities to hedge against the United States' uncertain future in the region.

Looking ahead, the Eastern Mediterranean must again command U.S. attention and resources to address the region's high potential for conflict and cooperation. Indeed, to an even greater extent than during the Cold War, the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial to the growing great power competition identified by the most recent U.S. national security and defense strategies as the chief threat to the United States. In addition to its renewed importance as NATO's southern bulwark against Russian expansion and Middle East instability, and given its sizable underwater resources, the region could either promote energy security or become the crucible for contesting freedom of the seas and other pillars of the U.S.-led international order.

The increasingly high stakes and uncertainty surrounding the future of the Eastern Mediterranean means the United States must treat the region as a coherent strategic entity – something which will be impossible unless the national security bureaucracy addresses the organizational stovepipes currently in its way. First and foremost, American policymakers must make abundantly clear to allies and adversaries alike that the Eastern Mediterranean is back as a critical focus for U.S. grand strategy.

# Endnotes

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