



Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way Out of the Current Deadlock

Galip Dalay¹



Greco-Turkish maritime disputes, couched in competing narratives of national sovereignty, date back as far as the founding periods of the two states. These disputes have traditionally taken the form of a frozen conflict, with occasional flare-ups. Given this backdrop, what factors are driving the current dispute, which is the longest-lasting crisis between the two countries since Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974?

This policy briefing argues that the crisis has been aggravated and complicated

by energy exploration and the Libyan conflict. It also underscores that this crisis is more perilous than previous disputes in part due to: 1) the power vacuum created by the United States downsizing its regional role in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and 2) the loss of the European Union (EU) accession framework. The void left by the United States has set off a scramble for power and influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East that should serve as a wakeup call for the EU to play a larger role in de-escalating the crisis.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Declare a moratorium on energy exploration:** The EU should focus its diplomacy and mediation on facilitating negotiations between Ankara and Athens. It is therefore crucial that both sides temporarily stop all drilling and exploration.
- **Avoid transferring decisionmaking power to military personnel on the ground:** In order to prevent accidents, the quarrelling parties should make decisions at the

national level, rather than transferring this power to military personnel on the ground.

- **Bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum:** While the immediate goal of the EU should be to freeze the conflict, a frozen conflict always runs the risk of thawing and providing opportunities for other actors to gain influence in the European neighborhood. As such, the EU should facilitate Turkey's accession into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.

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INTRODUCTION

Greco-Turkish maritime disputes, couched in competing narratives of national sovereignty, are nothing new. Their genesis dates as far back as the founding periods of the two states. These disputes have traditionally taken the form of a frozen conflict, with occasional flare-ups. Given this backdrop, what are the driving factors behind the current dispute, which is the longest-lasting crisis between the two countries since Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974?

The maritime dispute between the two countries centers on three issues: 1) disagreement over the boundaries of Greek territorial waters and the ownership of certain islands or isles in the Aegean Sea; 2) the question of the two countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the eastern Mediterranean; and 3) the unresolved nature of the Cyprus crisis. In addition to these matters, Turkey also contends that a number of other issues, such as the sovereignty or demilitarized status of certain Greek islands, remain unresolved and hence need to be addressed.² For its part, Greece rejects these demands outright as a violation of its sovereignty.

Because these disputes are tied to both countries' conflicting projections of national sovereignty, the concessions and compromises that would be necessary for their resolution are inherently difficult and politically costly. Additionally, the two sides cannot seem to agree on a framework within which to address the disputes: Greece favors the option of international arbitration, while Turkey prefers bilateral negotiations. But even if Ankara were to agree to international adjudication, only the next dispute to arise would be taken to international court. Furthermore, as indicated above, Athens wants international adjudication on a more specific and limited set of topics, whereas Ankara wants to put a broader range of topics on the table.

To make matters worse, the traditional sources of friction between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus

now dovetail with another set of interlocking geopolitical tensions and energy disputes in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and a group of countries including France, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As such, not only has the number of countries involved in the crisis grown, but also its scope has broadened to include new issues, including recent energy discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean and the ever-sprawling Libyan imbroglio. These issues, in turn, have qualitatively changed the nature of the crisis.

Such a turn of events in the eastern Mediterranean raises three interlinked questions: First, given the long genesis of the Turkish-Greek maritime disputes, why has the crisis heated up recently? Second, how has the crisis evolved, with the bilateral Greek-Turkish disputes morphing into an eastern Mediterranean crisis with multiple actors? And third, why is the crisis more perilous this time?

This policy briefing argues that the crisis has been aggravated and complicated by two distinct geopolitical developments, namely energy exploration and the Libyan conflict. It also underscores that this crisis is more perilous than previous disputes in part due to two systemic changes: 1) the power vacuum created by the United States downsizing its regional role in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and 2) the loss of the European Union (EU) accession framework. The void left by the United States has set off a scramble for power and influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East that should serve as a wakeup call for the EU to play a larger role in de-escalating the crisis.

BACKGROUND

The United States no longer views the European neighborhood, be it in the South or East, as holding high strategic value. Although Presi-

dent Donald Trump was responsible for many ill-conceived policy decisions, the partial U.S. withdrawal from the region actually started under President Barack Obama.³ Joseph Biden's administration is unlikely to reverse this trend in any significant way. At a time of U.S. absence, it falls squarely upon the Europeans to prevent the eastern Mediterranean crisis from getting out of hand—as of now, a conflict is unlikely, but not unthinkable. In the end, this is not only a crisis in Europe's neighborhood, but also a crisis within Europe, given the deep involvement of three EU member states, namely Greece, Cyprus, and France.

In this respect, German and European mediation efforts to de-escalate the crisis are steps in the right direction. However, the future prospects of these efforts will be contingent upon sharp diagnosis of the crisis, patience, commitment, and imaginative policy responses. The core of the crisis is the multi-layered maritime disputes between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. But Turkey-Greece relations are unfolding against the larger backdrop of the European framework. The honeymoon period between Ankara and Athens during the late 1990s and 2000s was a natural outcome and requirement of Turkey's EU accession vision and process at the time. This was the primary reason for the Turkish government's strong support for the United Nations (U.N.) plan that was put to a referendum in Cyprus in 2004 on the unification of the island. However, Turkey's EU accession process and aspirations have long since come to a standstill, which has in turn hurt Turkish relations with Greece and Cyprus.

This briefing, therefore, argues that German-European mediation should first aim to de-escalate the conflict between Athens and Ankara by toning down the high-pitched rhetoric on both sides and advocating for a temporary moratorium on energy exploration in the disputed waters. Furthermore, there is a need for Germany and France to find common ground in their policy approaches to the subject.

However, a frozen conflict always runs the risk of thawing and providing opportunities for other actors such as Russia to step in and gain further influence in the European neighborhood. As such, this briefing urges the EU to try to facilitate Turkey's accession into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. If this is not possible, efforts should be made to devise a trilateral framework involving the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum countries, the EU, and Turkey to deal with the crisis and explore the ways in which eastern Mediterranean gas reserves can be the source of cooperation, rather than conflict.

The eastern Mediterranean crisis, at its core, is not about energy. Thus far, no gas has been found in the disputed territories. Certainly, the eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries made by Israel in 2009 and 2010 (Tamar and Leviathan, respectively), Cyprus in 2011, and Egypt in 2015 (Zohr) have precipitated and aggravated the crisis.⁴ Yet, the roots of the crisis lie elsewhere, in conflicting claims by Turkey and Greece regarding maritime boundaries and EEZs on the one hand, and Cyprus on the other.

With respect to the first issue, Ankara and Athens disagree on the roles and extents of the islands in generating the EEZs, with the former taking a more restrictive view and the latter a more expansive one. With respect to the latter, Turkey objects to the Republic of Cyprus (or, more specifically, the Greek Cypriots) being the sole conductor of energy exploration activities in the eastern Mediterranean. By insisting on political equality between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Ankara contends that the Turkish administration in northern Cyprus (which is only recognized by Turkey) also has rights to undertake energy exploration activities and issue licenses.⁵

In this way, the interlocking set of maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece is strongly tied

to their conflicting projections of national sovereignty. As the following sections will demonstrate, these maritime disputes have since morphed into geopolitical confrontations and power struggles between Turkey and a set of countries including Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, and the UAE as a result of tensions over energy exploration and the Libyan conflict.

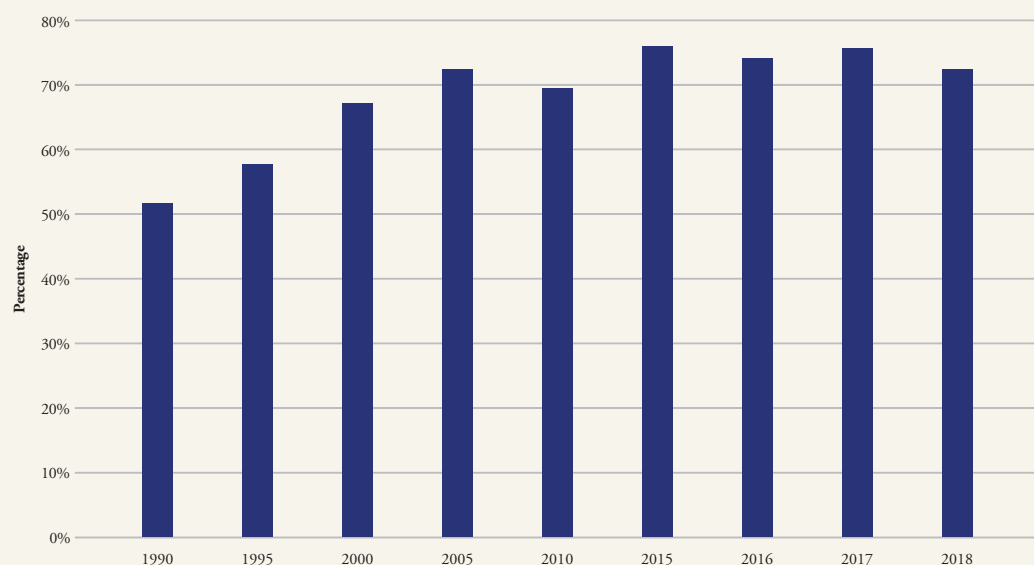
GAS DISCOVERIES: NOT THE CAUSE, BUT THE TRIGGER OF THE CRISIS

The recent gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean, combined with several other factors, have increased Turkey's appetite for hydrocarbon exploration. Energy trade is the main source of the country's budget deficit. Turkey imported 72.4 percent of its energy needs as of 2018 (see Figure 1), while energy constituted 16.8 percent of its overall imports as of June 2020.⁶ In the last five years, Turkey's total budget deficit amounted

to \$220 billion, according to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute and the Central Bank.⁷ In the same period, Turkey's overall energy bill stood at \$213 billion.⁸ Through hydrocarbon exploration, Turkey hopes to address its chronic economic problems; to this end, the country has doubled down on its energy exploration activities both in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, which recently culminated in a major gas discovery.⁹

Likewise, Turkey has long aspired to situate itself as an energy hub for, and corridor to, Europe and has signed several oil and gas pipeline deals with Azerbaijan, Iraq, Iran, and Russia (see Figure 2).¹⁰ However, its aspirations have largely remained unfulfilled. Along the same lines, Turkey wanted any eastern Mediterranean pipeline project to Europe to go through it. Yet, Ankara's difficult relations with almost all other countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean have made this option highly unrealistic.

Figure 1: Turkey's Reliance on Energy Imports (%)



Source: Muhammet Mercan, "Turkey's gas discovery could reduce energy dependency," ING Think, August 24, 2020, <https://think.ing.com/articles/black-sea-energy-more-to-prove>.

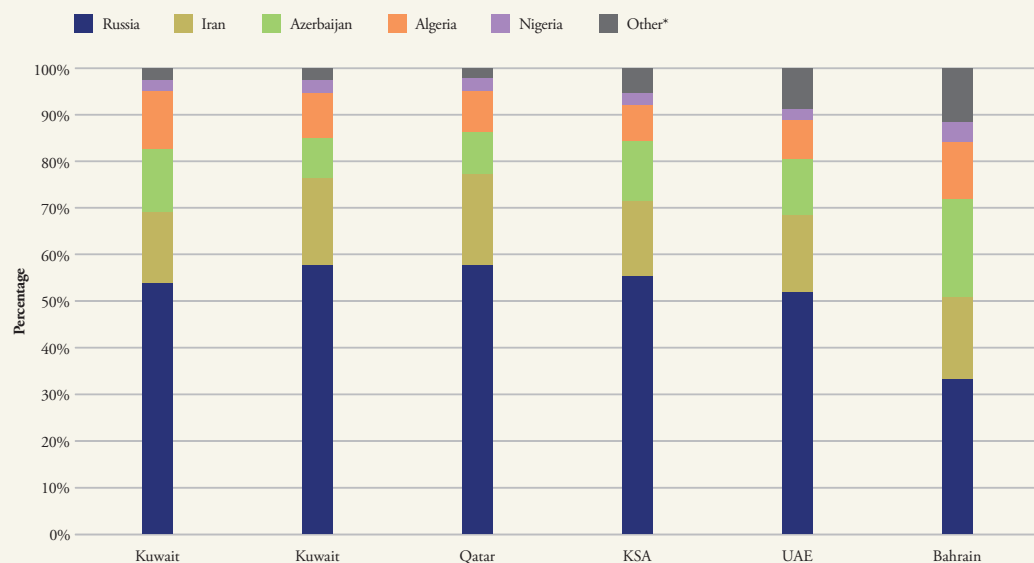
Figure 2: Turkey's Major Oil and Natural Gas Transit Pipelines



Through energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, Turkey also aims to reduce its strategic vulnerability and energy dependency (see Figure 3). For a long time, the top two exporters of natural gas to Turkey were Russia and Iran, two countries with which Turkey has competitive regional aspirations. In recent years, Turkey has pursued a policy of en-

ergy independence from these countries: during the first half of 2020, natural gas imports from Iran and Russia declined by 44.8 percent and 41.5 percent, respectively, compared to the same period of 2019 (though, in Iran's case, this decline was partially caused by a damaged pipeline).¹¹ In contrast, Turkey's imports from Azerbaijan increased by 23.4 percent during

Figure 3: Country Breakdown of Turkish Natural Gas Imports



Source: Mercan, "Turkey's gas discovery could reduce energy dependency."

the same period, giving Azerbaijan the largest share in Turkey's natural gas market.¹²

Despite Turkey's energy ambitions, the recent eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries have deepened its concerns of being sidelined from the region's emerging energy and security order.¹³ This is primarily due to two interlinked reasons: 1) the projected route for the eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline project and 2) the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. The envisioned €6.2 billion pipeline to Europe is premised on closer cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, and excludes Turkey.¹⁴ This tripartite cooperation gained an institutional form in January 2020 with the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which also includes Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Italy.¹⁵

Various geopolitical struggles, uncertainty over the amount of gas in the eastern Mediterranean, and the EU's green energy goals have made financing the project less attractive, and Italy has since withdrawn.¹⁶ The pipeline project is not economically feasible at this point, and is therefore unlikely to be implemented.¹⁷ However, the proposed pipeline and forum, as well as the regional realignment that underpinned them, have contributed to Turkish fears of being sidelined from the emerging energy and security framework in the eastern Mediterranean. In response, Turkey has deployed a hard power-driven approach and coercive diplomacy to prevent the emergence of such a framework.¹⁸

THE LIBYAN IMBROGLIO: LINKING MARITIME DISPUTES TO GEOPOLITICAL CONFRONTATION

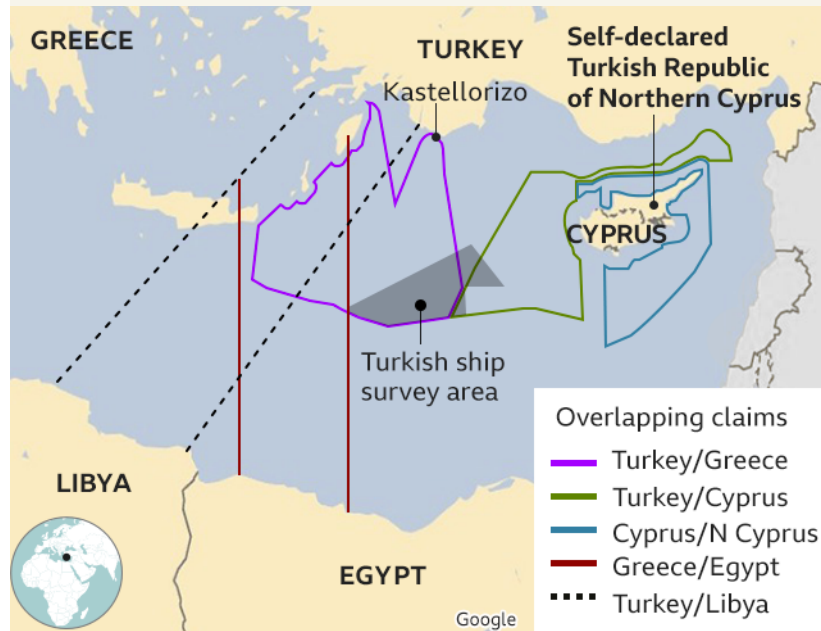
Turkey's Libya policy has served its strategy of disruption in the eastern Mediterranean, among other goals. Turkey signed two memoranda of understanding with Libya's U.N.-

recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in November 2019: the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean Sea and the Security and Military Cooperation Agreement.¹⁹ The first agreement demarcated Turkey's maritime boundaries with Libya, with the bilateral creation of an EEZ extending from Turkey's southern Mediterranean shore to Libya's northeast coast by disregarding major Greek islands such as Crete.²⁰ The second agreement enabled the GNA to withstand the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) leader Khalifa Hifter's offensive to take over Tripoli, as Turkey provided direct military support to the GNA. At a time when the GNA's desperate pleas for military support from European actors fell on deaf ears, the maritime boundaries deal was essentially the price to be paid to Turkey in exchange for the military cooperation deal.

In this way, the maritime boundaries deal had more to do with the eastern Mediterranean than it did with Libya. Because according to this deal, the proposed Israel-Greece-Cyprus gas pipeline would have to partially go through maritime areas claimed by Turkey (according to the Turkish-GNA maritime deal), thereby conveying Turkey's intention to disrupt any projects that aimed to circumvent it. Greece reacted strongly to the deal by expelling the GNA ambassador from Athens and cultivating closer ties with the LNA.²¹ However, because the deal disregards the big Greek islands, such as Crete and Rhodes, it is highly contested and on shaky ground from an international law perspective.

Not only has this step further increased tension between Turkey and Greece, but it also paved the way for Greece to sign a similar deal with Egypt in August 2020 to delimitate their respective maritime jurisdictions.²² The Turkish-Libyan deal conflicts with Greece's view of its own maritime boundaries, while the Greek-Egyptian deal does the same to Turkey (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Overlapping Maritime Claims by Different Actors in the Eastern Mediterranean



Source: Jonathan Marcus, "The Eastern Mediterranean tinderbox: Why Greek-Turkish rivalries have expanded," BBC News, August 25, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53906360>.

Note: The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is only recognized by Turkey.

The connection between Turkey's Libya policy and its eastern Mediterranean policy is well expressed by Turkey's "Mavi Vatan," or Blue Homeland, doctrine (or, more accurately, geopolitical concept).²³ The doctrine, which was coined by retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, has also been promoted by the former Chief of Staff of the Turkish Navy, Rear Admiral Cihat Yayci, who was the architect of Turkey's maritime boundaries deal with Libya.²⁴ The Blue Homeland doctrine is an imprecise, nebulous, and unofficial geopolitical concept, with roots going back to the mid-2000s. This concept and navy officers' other geopolitical ideas were seen as marginal and were not well received by the government at that time. However, after the failed 2016 coup attempt, anti-Westernism mounted in Turkey and the government took a decidedly nationalist turn, paving the way for the Blue Homeland doctrine to become more mainstream and gain more supporters among the governing elites in Ankara.

Though it is neither an official doctrine nor a policy, Blue Homeland nevertheless provides a powerful narrative for legitimizing the govern-

ment's eastern Mediterranean policy domestically. It draws on the perceived threat that "Turkey is being caged to Anatolia" and therefore needs to maintain access to and a high profile in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean.²⁵ Broadly, apart from its inconsistencies, the doctrine signifies an expanded idea of Turkey's maritime boundaries and power projection, as well as the re-imagining of Turkey's place in the world.

In practice, the Blue Homeland doctrine effectively represents three key ideas. First, it represents an expanded vision and understanding of Turkey's maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean; the maritime deal with Libya is manifestation of this.²⁶ The below map, drawn by Yayci himself, clearly illustrates these expanded boundaries. While the doctrine does not have any legal basis, it does indicate Turkey's determination to defend and safeguard these projected borders, or at least tries to give this impression.²⁷ Second, Blue Homeland is the Turkish navy's call to reimagine and reposition the country as a maritime power. Third, the doctrine signifies a reimagining of Turkey's place in the world. For Gürdeniz, Yayci, and

a certain group of nationalists and Eurasianists, Blue Homeland represents the reorientation of Turkey's foreign and security policies away from the West and toward Russia and China.²⁸

With respect to the first two points, the government and the nationalist/Eurasianist supporters of the Blue Homeland doctrine agree. However, they diverge on the last point, with the government appearing to be conscious of the limitations of Turkish-Russian relations. For instance,

in the Black Sea region, Turkey has formed closer relations with Ukraine in order to balance Russian influence.²⁹ These differences have also been exemplified by Turkey and Russia's respective policies on Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which are simultaneously competitive and cooperative. In any case, the proponents of Blue Homeland frame Turkey's Libya policy, and particularly the maritime deal, which set Turkey and Greece against each other, as a reflection of their doctrine.

Figure 5: Turkey's Projected Maritime Boundaries, According to the Architects of the Blue Homeland Doctrine



Source: "Mavi Vatan Kavramı ve Önemi" [The Blue Homeland Concept and Its Importance], Mavi-Vatan.net, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://mavivatan.net/mavi-vatan-kavrami-ve-onemi/>.

Note: The turquoise color represents Turkey's projected maritime boundaries (462,000 square meters) according to the proponents of the Blue Homeland doctrine. This map was drawn by Cihat Yaycı.

In addition, the Libyan conflict has pitted Turkey against the UAE, Egypt, and France, with spillover effects across the eastern Mediterranean. The UAE and Greece's decision to hold military exercises in Crete while Turkish-Greek tensions were running high, as well as the UAE's repeated expressions of support for Greece's position in the eastern Mediterranean, cannot be delinked from the deepening rivalry between the UAE and Turkey across the region, and particularly in Libya.³⁰ In the same vein, arguably the Greek-Egyptian maritime demarcation deal would not have been

inked if there were no Turkish-Egyptian rivalry in Libya or Turkish-Libyan maritime deal.³¹ Conscious of its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has recently made several gestures toward Egypt to explore whether it can find a *modus vivendi* with Cairo in Libya, hoping that such an accommodation will have a spillover effect on the eastern Mediterranean crisis.³²

Likewise, because Turkey and France support rival sides and pursue clashing interests in Libya, the conflict has significantly inflamed tensions

between them, which in turn have aggravated the crisis in the eastern Mediterranean. France has become the most vocal European power supporting the Greek-Cypriot position, underscoring its position by conducting military drills with Greece and sending the Charles de Gaulle nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean.³³ Turkey and France are also at odds with each other on a growing number of foreign policy topics, from Syria and Lebanon, to North and West Africa.

France has been particularly vocal in its criticism of Turkey's policy in the eastern Mediterranean. While competition between the two countries in the eastern Mediterranean is closely linked to their competition in Libya, unlike in Libya, where France's position in support of Hifter is unpopular internationally, in the eastern Mediterranean, France can express solidarity with its fellow EU members, Greece and Cyprus, and draw upon international law to justify its position. In this sense, the eastern Mediterranean has provided France with a more popular way to express its opposition to and discontent with Turkey's foreign policy, which runs counter to France's geopolitical aspirations in many different contexts. Thus, the geopolitical confrontation between Turkey, on the one side, and France, Egypt, and the UAE on the other, has spilled over into the eastern Mediterranean and become another source of tension.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given this background and context, how can the involved countries chart a way out of the current deadlock in eastern Mediterranean?

PRESSING PAUSE ON DRILLING AND EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES

Talk of solving the crisis is attractive, but not realistic at this stage, particularly within a short span of time. As argued above, there is not just one

crisis to be solved, but rather multiple crises. For instance, the tensions between Turkey and France differ from the long-lasting maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece. Therefore, instead of negotiating a grand bargain in the eastern Mediterranean, Germany, which is leading European diplomacy on the subject, and the EU should focus their diplomacy and mediation first on de-escalating the crisis between Ankara and Athens, thereby separating Turkish-Greek maritime disputes from broader geopolitical power plays in the region. It is crucial that both sides agree to halt drilling and exploration activities in the contested waters for at least some period of time if any negotiations are to commence in earnest.

HOSTING INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS TO PROMOTE DIALOGUE AND DE-ESCALATION

Likewise, a set of international meetings and conferences could serve as an effective means of de-escalation. Turkey has previously called for a conference of the littoral countries in the eastern Mediterranean to discuss their disputes, while European Council President Charles Michel has called for an international conference.³⁴ At this stage, an international conference, comprised of participants from countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean, plus Europe and NATO, could be a good start to dealing with the crisis within a multilateral framework.

By pointing to the "failure" of the Berlin conference on Libya, some might cast doubt on the usefulness and effectiveness of an international conference on the eastern Mediterranean.³⁵ However, unlike in Libya, where all major players work through proxies, all major players in the eastern Mediterranean are themselves on the ground. Because no one can hide behind the guise of proxies if they cause an incident, an international conference is more likely to be effective. Relatedly, in the eastern Mediterranean, no party has any interest in perpetuating the conflict. All sides have escalated the situation with the hope that the

other parties will back down and give them a way out. An international conference would therefore provide a face-saving exit from the crisis.

TAKING DECISIONMAKING POWER AWAY FROM ON-THE-GROUND MILITARY PERSONNEL

Greece and Turkey have already agreed to establish a de-confliction mechanism at the NATO level.³⁶ This is a welcome development, which significantly decreases—though does not eliminate—the risk of an accident or incident occurring between the two sides. To further reduce this risk, it is crucial that the quarrelling parties make decisions at the national level and do not transfer any major decisionmaking power to military personnel on the ground. As Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet in 2015 illustrated, endowing military personnel on the ground with major decisionmaking power always runs the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation.³⁷

TONING DOWN RHETORIC TO AVOID NARRATIVE ENTRAPMENT

The eastern Mediterranean crisis is a product of Turkey and Greece's conflicting views and narratives regarding national sovereignty, making it extremely difficult to resolve. In this context, the nuances between demands and rights, between disputes and sovereignty, disappear.

On top of this inherent difficulty, when Turkish and Greek political leaders adopt maximalist and high-pitched language to discuss their disputes, then any compromise or de-escalation comes across as weakness, and as compromising the sovereignty of the concerned country. This, in turn, paves the way for narrative entrapment, which basically annihilates any room for dialogue. One example of this was the shouting match that took place among political leadership in Turkey, Greece, and France during Summer 2020, which aggravated the dispute.³⁸ As such, it is crucial that the political

leaders in the concerned countries tone down their rhetoric and adopt responsible narratives.

ADVANCING A VISIONARY EU PLAN TO DEAL WITH THE CONFLICT

All the above-mentioned measures are geared toward de-escalating the conflict, and although de-escalation is essential, it should not be the end goal. Rather, it should be a strategy to facilitate negotiations and provide room for more imaginative policy alternatives.

As long as the current eastern Mediterranean crisis remains unaddressed, the region will be at risk of new crises. Moreover, any conflict provides an opening for actors such as Russia to step in. Europe therefore needs to advance a more imaginative foreign policy and broader regional vision.³⁹ In fact, during the current crisis, there have been references to Europe's past visionary achievements in the form of calls for a new Schuman Plan or a new Barcelona Process.⁴⁰

The Schuman Plan advocates take their inspiration from Europe's own history and experience. In the beginning of the 1950s, erstwhile foes Germany and France put the strategic industries of war, coal, and steel under a joint authority, which necessitated cooperation and delivered mutual benefits.⁴¹ The EU itself is a child of this visionary moment. Similarly, the original Barcelona Process, launched in 1995, aimed at strengthening the relationships between European and southern Mediterranean countries. As such, invoking a new Barcelona Process implies a broader region-to-region dialogue between Europe and southern Mediterranean countries, with a positive agenda for the future.

At the core of these proposals is the idea that the eastern Mediterranean should be treated as a shared common space and that its strategic resources—oil and gas—should advance the cause of cooperation, rather than conflict, among its littoral states. While there are many

different ways to achieve these lofty goals, they all require Europe to develop a geopolitical vision and commitment. At present, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is leading European diplomacy and mediation on the eastern Mediterranean conflict. However, she is in her last year in office and it is not clear whether there will be any other European leader of her stature and credibility that can play the same role once she leaves.

To be more concrete, though gas discoveries triggered the recent tension, the crisis is essentially political. Despite early optimism, it now appears that the gas reserves are smaller and less lucrative than expected, making the projected eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline project to Europe highly infeasible. On top of this, European energy transition and decarbonization goals mean that the commercial value of the gas will further diminish going forward, which could potentially open an avenue for conversation between the EU and littoral states of the eastern Mediterranean on energy transition and decarbonization in the European neighborhood.

For this to happen, the EU needs to advance a major decarbonization vision, along with a plan and commitment to implement it. At present, given the division within Europe and disagreement among Middle Eastern states about the nature of the regional order, such a grand plan might not resonate widely. That said, even a discussion of the subject among officials could shift the nature of the conversation on the eastern Mediterranean toward a more cooperative mode, thereby helping to reduce tensions.

CONCLUSION

The interlocking set of crises that have unfolded in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and its rivals are intractable. Given the actors' entrenched positions and the sensitivity of the topics involved, in the short-term, the priority of German and European diplomacy

should be to focus on conflict management, or re-freezing the conflict, rather than conflict resolution, as the latter aspiration is not attainable at this stage.

From this perspective, measures geared toward de-escalating the conflict are right ones. However, any temporary reduction of tensions or lulls in the conflict should not lead to complacency, as the eastern Mediterranean conflict is likely to cycle through escalation, de-escalation, and re-escalation. Instead, Europe and the concerned parties should utilize this narrow window of opportunity to advance a more imaginative policy and plan for the eastern Mediterranean, which can serve the collective security, economic, and energy interests of all main protagonists. In this regard, the EU should either try to facilitate Turkey's accession into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum or devise a trilateral framework wherein the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum countries, the EU, and Turkey could explore ways to manage their disputes and cooperate.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Galip Dalay is a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Doha Center (BDC). He is also the Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy, an associate fellow at Chatham House, and a doctoral researcher in the Faculty of History at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on the question of regionalism and regional order in the Middle East, Turkish domestic and foreign policy, regional Kurdish politics, political Islam, Turkish-Russian relations, and the history and politics of Turkish-Western relations. He would like to thank the research and communications teams, particularly Nader Kabbani, Theodosia Rossi, Nejla Ben Mimoune, and Sumaya Attia, at the BDC for their much appreciated support, as well as internal and external peer reviewers for their insightful feedback. He would also like to thank the Robert Bosch Academy team for arranging many bilateral meetings, as well as convening a closed online roundtable meeting on the subject. Finally, he is grateful to his wife, Zehra Senem Dalay, and his son, Ali Emir Dalay, for their unconditional support and love. This policy briefing is an extension of an op-ed previously published by Brookings: see Galip Dalay, “Is there a new window of opportunity in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis?,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), Brookings Institution, December 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/09/is-there-a-new-window-of-opportunity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-crisis/>.
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