

# **Energy Alliance in a Turbulent Region: The Implications of The East Med Gas Forum for Turkey and North Cyprus (TRNC)**

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## **Abstract**

*Geopolitics of the eastern Mediterranean Sea is heightened in importance primarily due to issues related to maritime claims, access, and the quest for energy resources. Rights to demarcate, protect, and exploit Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) are increasingly considered as significant aspects of sea power, strategy and security. In the light of recent hydrocarbon discoveries, a certain sense of disagreement has arisen among littoral states on how to equitably share the off-shore wealth, leading to formation of a U.S.-backed allied group named the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). Against the backdrop of this development, Turkey and North Cyprus (TRNC) increasingly find themselves isolated from the energy conundrum. This article seeks to examine the mounting instability in the eastern Mediterranean particularly with regards to rising energy geopolitics, alliance behavior, and challenges in monetization of the region's recently discovered natural gas resources. By addressing a range of*

*political, economic, and military insecurity issues related to offshore hydrocarbons, this research highlights possible emergent threats, challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities for related actors.*

*The article conceptually views “alliance building” within the broader context of the term “negotiation” itself. Intrinsically, the assessment recognizes the essential multilateral component in international relations and analyses issues that illustrate how factors in the possession, supply, and distribution of energy resources may impact the outlook of conflict and cooperation in the region. It is argued that coalitional arrangements in the EEZ dispute depict deal-making behavior and are inherently voluntary and unstable. Turkey and North Cyprus should be able to engage all stakeholders and create a positive atmosphere to invent options for mutual gain and try to pull away some members of the EMGF coalition, by carrots and sticks, if not form an alternative coalition of their own. This can reduce risks and vulnerabilities associated with the endeavor of accessing, exploring, and exploiting energy resources in the region. The article ultimately seeks to discuss the instruments through which hydrocarbon security challenges can be addressed such as advancement of intensive political engagement among conflicting parties to build confidence and resolve fundamental differences over competing claims of maritime delimitation, and of multilateral maritime security governance in the region, particularly in reference to the role of regional alliances.*

## 1. Introduction

The eastern Mediterranean is host to intractable conflicts, civil strife, and outright armed hostilities that have their roots in history, religion, and geography. Inextricably linked to long-standing confrontations in the region, recent discovery of offshore natural gas sparked a new dispute over delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), due to competition over rights to exploit rich energy resources and to exert political influence for furtherance of national interests. The combined proven reserves of recoverable natural gas resources around Cyprus, the Levant, and Nile basins combined, are over 8 billion cubic meters (bcm)<sup>1</sup> that could guarantee to meet the demand in the region for the next one hundred years. As crises with Russia over many years have led energy consumers of the industrialized world finally to become serious about hydrocarbon alternatives, international shipment projects over Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey compete to gain feasibility and security appraisals in finding the most cost-effective energy supply route to Europe and East Asia.

Since the viability and security of international projects depend on the extent of a just and equitable resolution of the EEZ delimitation dispute, the situation has underscored crucial strategic position of Cyprus and heightened its importance within a power struggle between the U.S., EU, and Russia to control energy supply routes in Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe. Rival claims for EEZs have not only escalated the tension between Greeks Cypriots-Greece, Egypt, and Turkey-Turkish Cypriots, but also drew Israel, Lebanon, and Libya into the dispute, thus turning the region into a potential crisis spot that hinders regional stability and prosperity. *Ceteris Paribus*, in an asymmetric region characterized by constant shift of alliances, such as the eastern Mediterranean, aspiring pre-eminent regional power centers pursue

hegemonic goals coercing smaller entities to acquiesce to their policies.<sup>2</sup> This enables short-term, issue-based partnerships rather than permanent alliances. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) is the culmination of such a joint effort led by Israel, and supported by the U.S., to unite littoral states in the region around a common goal to prepare, coordinate, interact, and develop common positions against Turkey. The agreement aims to enclose Turkey and confine its EEZ from a potential of 145,000 km<sup>2</sup> to less than one third of it, a mere 41,000 km<sup>2,3</sup> and transfer gas via alternative routes to demand centers around the globe.

Turkey, in response to this provocative stance, sharply criticized the block's total exclusion of its legitimate interests and disregard for equitable delimitation of maritime zones. As a show of coercive power to tip the balance in the stand-off against Greek Cyprus-Greece and deter any miscalculation, Ankara reasserted its presence by launching an aggressive demonstration of gunboat diplomacy. The notable change in Turkey's defense posture supported by an impressive arsenal of homegrown high-technology platforms prompted sharp rebuke from leading EMGF members, the EU, and the U.S., claiming that the so-called "Republic of Cyprus" is the sole legitimate authority to explore gas in the otherwise contested waters of the island. The Greek Cypriot government, on the other hand, continued to enhance its relations with regional powers, like Saudi Arabia, through high-level visits and interactions<sup>4</sup> to enlarge the EMGF's capacity, influence, and decision-making power to try to corner Turkey into a *fait accompli*. Greek Cypriot government subtly leverages the EMGF not only as another driving force for cooperation and coordination of regional energy policy<sup>5</sup> but also as a useful tool of coercive diplomacy to coalesce Turkish Cypriots-Turkey with its unilateral, unlawful pursuits. These push -and-pull relationships escalated tensions in an already fragile region

fraught with intractable conflicts resulting in political uncertainty and increasing economic risk for monetization of hydrocarbon resources.

## **2. The Eastern Mediterranean and Energy Geopolitics**

Since a military coup in 1974 led by an ultra-right-wing Greek Cypriot armed group, EOKA-B, to unite Cyprus with Greece prompted Turkey's military intervention, the island is split into two parts. The northern Turkish part declared its independence in 1983 and has been recognized only by Turkey, whereas the southern Greek part has, against all odds, since then gained international recognition as the legitimate representative government of Cyprus. The "dual minority" problem in Cyprus, in which Turkish Cypriots feel overwhelmed by Greeks who in turn are anxious about Turkey's military presence, has made it a notoriously difficult conflict to resolve. Discovery of hydrocarbons in Cypriot waters has only exacerbated the case and spread animosity to the region by pulling international actors into the quagmire.

The Greek Cypriot government has passed a law in 2004 defining and regulating its EEZ, in which there are thirteen sub-zones that can be auctioned for concession agreements to energy companies. After signing EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010, the government began the process in 2011 for natural gas exploration with assistance from the U.S.-based Noble Energy and granted further exploration licenses to Italian-South Korean venture ENI-KOGAS, French Total, American Exxon Mobil, and Qatar Petroleum between 2013 and 2019 to start drilling and production. Greek Cypriot EEZ overlaps the area Turkey claims as its EEZ in five of the thirteen offshore research blocks:<sup>6</sup> 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 on the island's west and southwest. In the absence of a binding treaty and diplomatic recognition, neither side may unilaterally appeal to international adjudication on the dispute nor could a bilateral meeting take place to negotiate the border demarcation. The EU provides open support and encouragement to Greek Cypriots for their unilateral EEZ claims, obliges Turkey to implement the UN

Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as part of the *Community Acquis*, and links progress on membership to the union with resolution of the Cyprus Problem. Against common sense, ethics, and rule of law, Turkey-Turkish Cypriot have been ostracized from the energy equation as a result of the EU-backed Greek Cypriot waywardness.

Prior to the EMGF's launch, Greek Cypriots, Greece, Egypt, and Israel had already established separate trilateral cooperation mechanisms,<sup>7</sup> receiving strong support from both the U.S. and the EU in the process.<sup>8</sup> The key actor here, Israel, has a clear interest in diversifying its alliances and fostering common commercial interests with all littoral states in the region. Its primary goal in the EEZ dispute is not necessarily to see Greeks and Turks agree on everything, but rather to secure access to EEZs of all countries, because consent of the coastal state with jurisdiction over the EEZ is required for the delineation of the course for the laying of pipelines on the continental shelf,<sup>9</sup> whether it be via Greece or Turkey towards the EU.

Nevertheless, international recognition, partisan perceptions, and cognitive biases cause Greek Cypriot government to interpret the context according to its beliefs and interests and lead to an illusion that it is contrary to the objective reality, not realizing how these factors influence its attitudes. It refuses to share revenue or extracts from any offshore hydrocarbon resources with Turkish Cypriots until there is so-called "measurable progress towards a solution of the island's division", which itself, in every sense of the word, is an impossibility due to the Greek side's intransigence and indulgence with the status-quo. Turkish Cypriot government suggested in a confidence-building move to treat gas finds as a common heritage of the entire island and to explore hydrocarbons in a joint development area that could partly satisfy the EEZ claims of both parties. Greek Cypriot side rejected it outright, instead

offering only 30% of gas income to accrue to Turks from the energy fund to be established in 2022.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. The Role of Regional Alliances in the Energy Equation**

Against this geopolitical backdrop, the EMGF was inaugurated at a critical time amid significant gas discoveries in the region. ENI's discovery of the giant 850 bcm reserve in Egypt's "Zohr" field on top of Greek Cypriot deep-sea drills on "Aphrodite" in block 12, "Calypso" in block 6, and "Glafkos" in block 10 excited energy firms to continue exploration activities.<sup>11</sup> In a tit-for-tat move, Turkey scrambled to dispatch two exploration vessels and two drilling platforms of its own to join the game, escorted by navy frigates, albeit lately but decisively. The gunboat diplomacy quickly paid off and, facing the risk of a showdown amid escalating tensions, ENI announced its hesitancy to operate in contested waters plied by warships off the island's southwest coast.<sup>12</sup> Turkey's military intervention in northern Syria for self-defense against terrorist factions sent a strong signal to concerned capitals around the globe about what Ankara might do if the push comes to shove on critical national issues.

From the Greek leadership's standpoint, what this spells is that Greek Cypriots do not have sufficient power to exert influence on Turkey by acting alone, but parties in a coalition can exercise more power than any of them individually.<sup>13</sup> Greek decision-making polity see Turkey's proximity and military power as extremely threatening and perceive themselves as extremely weak.<sup>14</sup> Greek Cypriot EEZ claims are part of the larger agenda in Nicosia to level the playing field so that a "fair" settlement to the island's division will be possible. In other words, Greek Cypriots entered into regional alliances as a geostrategic measure to counter Turkey's asymmetric military, economic, and diplomatic power. It is no surprise that to gain asymmetric advantage is actually the goal



of a war: One side will inevitably want to dominate over the other and make the balance asymmetric.<sup>15</sup> Yet, a war does not necessarily involve conflict, and, in accordance with Sun Tzu's statement in his famous work "The Art of War", Greek Cypriot aim is to win the war without fighting the war.<sup>16</sup>

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the group of seven founding members of the EMGF, comprised of Greece, Greek Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian Authority, launched the alliance in early 2019 with Cairo, a staunch opponent of Turkey, as its chosen official seat. The group aims to create a common vision, to increase efforts to mark out maritime zones, and to foster energy cooperation in the region according to official press releases. Nevertheless, since most of the EMGF's members have been in various levels of conflict with Turkey, the initiative is clearly intended to be not purely an economic alliance to regulate the regional gas market but a platform with wider aim and scope to coordinate political, diplomatic, and military cooperation among participants to deliver clear messages to Ankara,<sup>17</sup> as confirmed by the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). In the words of Israel's former ambassador to Nicosia, this is also evident in the forum's intention to provide backing to Greek Cypriots, including a "defense shield", against Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

The forum is also intended to create an OPEC-like<sup>19</sup> cartel organization to fence out unsought interference and confine gas trade to an elite group of producers with assigned quotas on each. EGMF members enjoy worldwide support to leverage their potential and turn the region into an energy supply center and – in the case of Cyprus – a transit hub, while Turkey as a regional powerhouse aims to take an equitable share of the gas trade whether it be with its conduit potential<sup>20</sup> and/or exploiting potential reserves in its EEZ. The resulting impasse is partly due to the "groupthink" that involves overestimation of the

EMGF coalition's stability and contributes entrenchment into its own position. The issue of specific focus on gas finds involves high coordination among participants of the EMGF, but unless the scope grows materially – not just verbally – into a bloc-like formation, then the group's cohesion remains fragile in the face of external events, costly tradeoffs, and other pressing national priorities. Nevertheless, it is worth to bear in mind that esprit de corps among members of this policy-making group may result in irrational actions against Turkey,<sup>21</sup> because currently recoverable offshore gas resources in the Levant Basin are inadequate to build a multi-billion-dollar undersea pipeline, the so-called "East Med", from the Middle East to Europe. Egypt has become energy self-sufficient since natural gas production at Zohr field touched 27.9 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year according to the petroleum ministry.<sup>22</sup> It is not a party to this mega pipeline project and remaining members have insufficient capacity to profitably economize on gas volumes in their EEZ. Even the option to export LNG via Egypt has certain security, market reach, and capacity risks.<sup>23</sup>

The critical task for Turkey, therefore, is to have its voice heard and to push its proposal among a sea of other parties. It is crucial for Ankara to change the bilateral negotiation geometry between Turks and Greeks, and address the complex, multipartite nature of the EEZ dispute. Turkey should be able to engage all stakeholders and create a positive atmosphere to invent options for mutual gain and try to pull away some members of the coalition, like Jordan and Italy, by carrots and sticks. A rule-of-thumb in geopolitics is to respond to an international coalition of power with its akin.<sup>24</sup> The sequencing strategy for building an alternative coalition in response to the EMGF should be "Bootstrapping": Turkey should attract easier, closer partners and decision makers such as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Russia, and Syria to itself, utilizing overall patterns of deference and influence, gradually engaging and extending overtures to harder partners such as Egypt and Israel further in the process.

This will enable Turkey to capitalize on a legitimate, multilateral framework for security in the eastern Mediterranean instead of being branded as a spoiler in the game.

Furthermore, a previously overlooked opportunity exists in Libya for Turkey to delineate EEZs. The country is torn apart between the UN-recognized government backed by Turkey and Qatar in Tripoli and the Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian backed regime in Tobruk. Taking advantage of the civil war, Greece incrementally filled the vacuum left behind by Libya in the maritime space after Moammar Gaddafi's death in 2011. It began to consider the international waters north of Libya as if they are its own territorial waters, claiming rights over 39,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Libyan maritime zone and increasing its power around Crete that is seen as the gate to eastern Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup> Not long ago, the tendency in Ankara had been to downplay such maneuvers on the assumption that "what states do matters a lot more than what they say"<sup>26</sup> and that multilateral negotiations may anyhow take a certain period of time before a conclusive agreement may be reached. This passive policy has dramatically changed in the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey as the defense ministry began to actively voice its concerns with Libyan authorities.<sup>27</sup> On the one extreme end of the scale, if Turkey can wrestle out Greece and sign a bilateral demarcation agreement with Libya, it would significantly shift the balance in maritime diplomacy in Turkey's favor. On the other hand, if Greece and Egypt, both of which are signatories to UNCLOS, mark out their EEZ boundary as reiterated over several summits, this would be a nightmarish scenario for Ankara, depriving it of any legal instrument to oppose their unconscionable claims.

Finally, it is no coincidence that the Syrian arena is an extension of hostilities in the eastern Mediterranean theater by proxy warfare. Turkey's recent military offensive in Northern Syria dealt a blow to the Israeli-U.S.-EU, and hence by

definition, EMGF's calculus to carve out a contiguous zone of PKK/YPG Kurdish controlled statelet along Turkey's southern border. Otherwise, a Kurdish state with access to the Mediterranean would be the next partner to join the EMGF at Turkey's expense, thus consolidating the entire regional gas trade with Israel's blessing. Evidently, the U.S. sanctions list prepared in response to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in Syria included the Turkish energy minister as a deterrence measure against further Turkish action in the Mediterranean.

Since the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and Arab countries, there has been only "cold peace", i.e. formal diplomatic recognition without any deep-nested economic interests or trade links between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. Israel launched a new foreign policy initiative in 2017 to break this stalemate and build trade relationships, invest in infrastructure, and coordinate a common policy on energy trade with its neighbors. Egypt, especially, has a keen interest to cooperate with Israel and become a regional gas hub.<sup>28</sup> Turkey, North Cyprus, Syria, and Lebanon have been excluded from this alliance due to being in various levels of conflict with most member states of the EMGF.

Turkey is criticized by opposition groups at home and abroad for its wrong doings since the start of the Syria War, but this should not obscure a previously overlooked opportunity that is now on the horizon. If and when Turkey sits at the negotiation table to reconcile its differences with the Assad regime, to re-open embassies and help in Syria's reconstruction, energy partnership should definitely be a top item on the agenda. Russia is building Akkuyu nuclear power plant near Mersin, Turkey, which is in close proximity to Syria. Together with Russia, Turkey should be the preferred partner for construction of the infrastructure, exploration, and shipment of natural gas from Syria. This would be the foundation of a new regional energy cooperation deal.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The energy-focused alliance of EMGF led by Israel, taken advantage of by Greek Cyprus, and backed by the EU-U.S. partnership is an inherently unstable entity but has a significant potential to define rules of the game even in Turkey-Turkish Cypriot absence. Turkey has kept on the table an offer to resolve maritime disputes with its neighbors through negotiations for many years. The status-quo seemingly reached an impasse where parties dug into their bargaining positions within a perceptual zero-sum game, leaving no face-saving options out of it without significant political costs. Turkey should not fall prey to an international conspiracy to back down on its rightful search for an equitable solution to the maritime dispute in the Mediterranean, but neither should it be permanently left out of a regional alliance. It should re-align its policy stance and pursue a value-creating strategy to expand the pie in maritime negotiations with key littoral states in the region, perhaps forming its own coalitional arrangement in the face of a hostile group of EMGF members. The key guiding principle should be to avoid brinkmanship during the process and maintain a firm posture to deter any miscalculation by the opposing parties

## Endnotes

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