

The EastMed Gas and Philia Forums: Reimagining Cooperation in the Mediterranean

by [Rauf Baker \(/experts/rauf-baker\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Rauf Baker \(/experts/rauf-baker\)](#)

Rauf Baker is a Syrian journalist and researcher with experience covering Europe and the Middle East. Baker is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

Arab and Mediterranean countries with common interests are creating new shared tools that can be used to combat Turkish and Iranian influence in their regions.

Over the past decade, shifts in the regional balance of power have generated renewed political challenges in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean that necessitate the expansion and diversification of regional relations and alliances. In addressing these changes, there is a need for a more practical version of the Mediterranean region's international institution, the Union for the Mediterranean, in which states shape their foreign policy and economic strategy with a shared vision. Already, the EastMed Gas Forum and Philia Forum seem poised to take up that role.

Since the birth of the Union of the Mediterranean in 2008, the geostrategic effectiveness of the organization has weakened. When the European Union launched the [Barcelona Process \(https://www.barcelona.com/barcelona_news/the_barcelona_process_or_euro_mediterranean_partnership\)](#) (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) in 1995, the EU had barely settled into its current form, and Cyprus was not yet included. The Arab-Israeli peace process was at its peak, and Turkey and Iran had not yet expanded in the region as they are doing today. Since then, the role of the Union for the Mediterranean, an institution that emerged from the Barcelona process, has gradually waned, increasingly resembling a non-governmental organization concerned with environmental issues, women's rights, and water security rather than a bloc with coherent politico-economic and security goals. This change has largely been the result of the Union's generous membership system that allowed entry by states who have little in common—the Union currently includes [41 \(https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/member-states/\)](#) countries, spanning from Sweden to Mauritania.

The [EastMed Gas Forum \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-energy-idUKKCN26D14D\)](#), which was launched about a year ago, could serve in the kind of streamlined geopolitical role that the Union is currently unable to fill. The forum's members include Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, France, and Egypt, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), United States, and the European Union as observing members. What sets the forum

apart, as the name implies, is that it is limited to gas-rich Mediterranean countries and their neighbors, all of whom already enjoy strong interrelations. Therefore, as opposed to the loose Gas Exporting Countries Forum, sometimes called “the OPEC of gas,” the EastMed Gas Forum serves as an alliance that aims to create a what some might call a “Gas Gulf,” a geostrategic area in the Mediterranean whose politics could resemble those of the oil-rich Arab Gulf states.

While economic interests are at least theoretically the central link between the EastMed Gas Forum states, many of those countries have not shied away from connecting on issues of politics and security. Recently, the foreign ministers of Cyprus, Greece, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain **announced the formation** (<https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-announcement-on-the-phia-forum-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-athens-11-february-2021.html>) of a Friendship Forum (Philia Forum). The announcement followed a meeting hosted by Athens **aimed at strengthening cooperation between the states and “actively” contributing to consolidating security, stability and peace in the region** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1811096/middle-east>). Philia could be seen as the political arm of the EastMed Gas Forum, and the long history of consensus between its participating states will likely boost its effectiveness. This consensus is a major asset to the forum, and it opens more space for the possibility of implementing comprehensive regional arrangements, leaving no opportunity for individual moves or turns driven by circumstantial changes. Ultimately, with a more selective membership and collective goals, in addition to the aversion among political elites to Ankara’s and Tehran’s populist politics, the forum could become a body for pushing back against Turkish and Iranian influence in the region.

In fact, many of the Philia and Gas Forum countries have hastened to enter into military agreements and participate in joint military activities and trainings. In January, Cyprus and the UAE **signed a military cooperation agreement** (<https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2021/01/12/cyprus-uae-sign-first-military-cooperation-agreement/>) that includes organizing joint maneuvers and training programs, as well as coordinating to expand operational cooperation. In addition, the Abraham Accords have opened space for further intelligence and security cooperation between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain. In another example of military cooperation between the forums’ states, Saudi Arabia established the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, **a new bloc** (<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200108-new-red-sea-alliance-formed-saudi-arabia-notable-exclusions>) of eight regional countries headquartered in Riyadh. In addition, last month, Greece said it will deploy some of its Patriot anti-aircraft missile systems on Saudi soil to help protect the kingdom's oil facilities against missile and drone strikes from Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. It is also no secret that Riyadh and Amman are concerned about Turkish and Iranian activities in the region. Ankara and Tehran support armed militias in Syria and Iraq that control long parts of the border with Jordan, and Iran continuously threatens Saudi Arabia’s security through its proxies Iraq and Yemen, both of which border the kingdom.

In addition to military ties, Philia and Gas Forum countries share broad strategic goals. Both Cyprus and Greece have historical ties with Arab states, some of whom see the two countries as their gateway to Europe. The Cypriot-Arab relationship further benefits from Arab support for the unity of Cyprus and refusal to recognize the so-called “Turkish Republic of Cyprus,” despite Turkey’s identity as an Islamic country. Furthermore, Greece and Egypt made progress on their rapprochement last summer through the **demarcation of maritime borders** (<https://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/1/64/397498/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-Greece-maritime-demarcation-deal-posted-on-.aspx>), which seeks to prevent Turkey from illegal gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean. Egypt also sees Greece as a strategically important connection because it borders the Balkans, giving it greater leverage in what could be termed a “vital space” for Ankara.

Likewise, France—one of the engineers of the Barcelona Process—aspires to play a greater role in the Arab-

Mediterranean axis, especially after Britain's exit from the European Union. Paris is experiencing a cold war with Ankara and has not hidden its dissatisfaction with the cover provided by Chancellor Angela Merkel to Turkey. Even Italy, which is said to be steering a middle course, will not hesitate to expand its network of relations at a time when it needs energy for economic recovery. As for Israel, currently enjoying accelerated energy cooperation with Cairo, voices are rising in decision-making circles that consider Turkey to be no less a threat than Iran. Egypt and Israel have agreed to establish a joint subsea **gas pipeline** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-egypt-pipeline-int-idUSKBN2AL0FA>) to increase Israeli exports to Europe via Egypt.

Clearly, the countries of the two forums have realized the dangers of the chaos that accompanied the Arab Spring and U.S. withdrawal from the region. Powers such as Turkey and Iran have aimed to fill the vacuum through their proxies in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya. Philia and Gas Forum countries appear to have recognized that these novel threats are playing out over a vast geographical space, spanning from the Arabian Peninsula to Northwest Africa, and that such magnitude of changing dynamics requires collective effort.

Looking forward, it is expected that the Turks will set out to reduce tension in the neighborhood and temporarily make a tactical retreat in their expansionist policies in the wake of the new U.S. administration's demonstrated wariness of Ankara's behavior. Thus, until they can clarify their status with Washington, Turkey will be in a more vulnerable position than it has been at any time in the past, giving impetus to the countries of the two forums to consolidate their strategy. On the other hand, Iran may take an opposite approach and escalate tensions in regional hotspots—specifically Iraq and Yemen—in order to obtain benefits from Washington regarding the nuclear deal.

Accordingly, many countries on the Arabian Peninsula, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea have crystallized a strategy to build a buffer against any attempt to destabilize the already tumultuous region. A strengthened framework for implementing this strategy would preserve energy security, coordinate counterterrorism efforts, and ensure that the refugee crisis is not exploited to score political points. It would also effectively confront the economic challenges of a post-COVID-19 world by linking economies stretching from Western Europe to the Arabian Peninsula, the eastern Mediterranean and eastern Africa. As of now, the EastMed Gas and Philia forums are embodiments of that crystalizing strategy, and they could serve as potent tools of international politics in the near future. ❖

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