

# Shifting East Mediterranean Tides: From Conflict to Club Med?

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**Although the worst-case scenarios of just a few years ago are in abeyance, the best-case ones of transformative cooperation are also still out of reach.**

**W**e are now in the midst of a transition in the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: away from conflict and toward coexistence, if not cooperation. How and why has this shift accelerated and expanded in recent months? What makes it likely to continue, at least for a while? In offering answers to these questions, this essay examines the big picture of this regional transformation.

The single most significant factor behind this positive shift is the change in Turkey's position, broadly signifying the triumph of domestic politics over foreign policy. At the same time, all politics aside, global energy, climate, and economic factors also play their part. The perceived short-term relative value and the preferred destinations of the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas resources have changed, generally making confrontations about them less likely in the near term.

To appreciate just how different this seascape appears today, one must look back a bit, only as far as 2019–2020. During much of these two years, the region witnessed continual mini crises over competing drilling, exploration, maritime claims, and actual naval military operations all over the Eastern Mediterranean, from the Libyan coast all the way to the Lebanese one. In sharp contrast, the past year and a half have seen much less of this behavior. Leading the pack in both categories, for worse in the recent past and for better today, is Turkey.

## Turkey and Its Change of Policy

**A**s is often the case, the source of Turkey's change of policy (if not of heart) toward its neighbors can be found at home. President Erdogan will be up for reelection in about a year, and the Turkish economy is sinking around him. The lira is depreciating, inflation is running around 40%, Turkey's credit rating has been degraded to junk, and

now, having lost elections in the major metropolises, the ruling AKP's provincial middle-class base has also been hard hit.

So Erdogan needs an economic lifeline, badly, and soon—sooner than any offshore energy riches could become available. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are obvious candidates as benefactors, but for a price: Make up with us, with Egypt, and even with Israel, along with their new Mediterranean friends. Senior Gulf, Egyptian, Greek, and Israeli officials are now visiting Turkey for the first time in years, with the former promising tens of billions of dollars in aid, trade, bank deposits, and investments—with an eye to isolating Iran and other threats.

In response, Turkey is cutting back its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. It is cooperating to a greater extent with peacemaking efforts in Libya—where it had only recently sent an audacious military expedition in support of one side of that civil war and claimed large swaths of the Mediterranean as its price. It is also signaling a new willingness to negotiate with rather than bully all its Mediterranean neighbors on maritime border delineation.

Israel is a special case in point. For all the animosity between Erdogan and Israel, it has been over a decade since any overt violent confrontations of the notorious Mavi Marmara kind off the coast of Gaza. At the opposite, positive extreme, on February 4, 2022, Erdogan very publicly broke new official ground in this area, telling Turkish reporters that, “We can use Israeli natural gas in our country, and...we can also engage in a joint effort on its passage to Europe.”

This is actually more of a pipe dream than a serious prospect, but that is for economic and logistical reasons rather than political ones. The key point here is that the political will now exists in Ankara for a Mediterranean rapprochement, for domestic political and economic drivers that will probably persist over the next few years.

## Lebanon

**T**he past year has also witnessed much discussion about bringing Lebanon on board. One item is a scheme to bring East Med natural gas to Lebanon, by a very roundabout overland pipeline route via Jordan and Syria, with the gas originating in Egyptian and Israeli waters. This complex project is being mediated by Washington, with the stated goal of easing Lebanon's dire economic straits.

Another unstated objective is to encourage progress, or at least resumed negotiations, over the disputed Israeli-Lebanese maritime border. In early 2022, Lebanon's Hezbollah-dominated government finally agreed to return to those talks, also mediated by Washington. Even though an agreement does not appear on the horizon, just some prospect of one is likely to prevent tensions from escalating.

Although development of Lebanon's offshore gas potential, after an agreed delimitation with Israel, would take years, it would eventually promise a significant windfall for a truly hard-pressed national economy. Moreover, it may also provide a disincentive for actions against Israeli assets at sea; the Lebanese, even Hezbollah, fully understand that no corporation would invest in a war zone.

Yet Hezbollah seems in no great rush to finalize either deal. This obstructionism represents the triumph of politics over economics, in sharp contrast to the Turkish case. For its own ideological and self-interested reasons, Hezbollah would rather preside over a disintegrating economy than anger Iran or acknowledge any agreement with Israel. Although in this Hezbollah remains an outlier in the new East Med configuration, it is also deterred from instigating a severe direct clash with its southern neighbor.

## Israel

**A**t the heart of Israel's contemporary Mediterranean policy lies a paradox. Israel is keen to amass as many regional partners as it can and welcomes deconfliction among the relevant rival claims. Thus, Israel is responding cautiously but favorably to the latest overtures from Ankara for maritime and energy coordination, while

maintaining close liaison with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt (as well as the UAE, which is involved in various Mediterranean ventures). The Israeli government has also quietly signed on to the transit of Egyptian and Israeli offshore gas through Jordan to Syria and Lebanon.

Yet the new Israeli governing coalition is subject to serious cross-pressures from environmentally minded elements, particularly as its minister of environment hails from the left. For that reason, it has put on hold several major pertinent projects. These include a proposed UAE oil and gas pipeline expansion, from Eilat on the Red Sea to Ashdod on the Mediterranean, as well as any large-scale new offshore oil or gas exploration and drilling. Adding to this uncertainty is the fragility of Israel's current government, which hangs by the thread of one seat in the Knesset.

Alongside this Israeli hesitancy, a new obstacle arose in early 2022: The US announced that it no longer will back the construction of Israeli (or Egyptian) undersea energy pipelines to Europe. Nevertheless, the EU has just come up with a partial workaround—which the US supports—that promises to be more economically, environmentally, and technically feasible: a subsea electricity cable to Europe from Egyptian, Cypriot, and/or Israeli production, with approximately \$700 million in actual proposed investment. If this project really does materialize, it will literally lay more concrete foundations for cooperative cross-Mediterranean multilateral relations of this nature.

## Greece and Cyprus

A detailed account of Greek or Cypriot policy on East Mediterranean issues is beyond the scope of this overview. Suffice it to say that both governments have welcomed the new warmth in Turkey's posture, including high-level visits, conciliatory official statements, some agreements on various secondary matters, and—most important—the near absence of provocative actions.

Still, none of the core controversies at stake has been resolved, nor is likely to be any time soon. A final, formal settlement of the division or unification of Cyprus remains elusive—along with the conflicting maritime claims entailed. Similarly, there is but little progress on expanding the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to include Turkey. In effect, then, the most plausible near-term prognosis is for relative calm but not conflict resolution nor much active cooperation.

## Egypt

One clear beneficiary of these new East Med alignments is Egypt. It no longer faces danger from Turkey, whether offshore, in Libya, or in domestic political terms. It is an eager candidate for several of the new multilateral energy proposals, all with outside funding. And it enjoys the enhanced and largely effective global and regional interest in the security of transit through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, in which it may take on a modestly increased role.

Meanwhile, Egypt is free to pursue additional bilateral or multilateral East Med deals of its own, with an eye at least as far afield as Syria. None of this, however, promises a really major infusion of cash or investment in the country's continually on-the-edge economy. And Cairo is distracted by simmering unrest on other fronts, whether in Ethiopia or Sudan.

So, while Egypt's overall role in the region is under gradual restoration, it is unlikely to become the lead initiator or instigator of earlier times. Instead, for calculated reasons of its own interests, it is likely to reinforce the new general inclination toward stability and conflict reduction. That alone can be considered a valuable contribution to the common good.

A significant aspect is Egypt's place in Mediterranean migration or refugee flows. Despite high levels of poverty and population pressure, now at well over 100 million and counting, Cairo keeps remarkably tight control over this traffic. The continuing flow to Egypt of EU and US aid and investment is surely, in some measure, the other side of

this tacit bargain.

## Spoilers and Wild Cards: Iran, Hamas, Russia, and China

A few others merit very quick consideration here. Hamas controls Gaza, but not its coast, which is under constant Israeli patrol. To be sure, arms and other smuggled items still get through to a certain extent. Yet none of that is enough to create a significant offshore threat. During the May 2021 ten-day skirmish between Hamas and Israel, the former fired thousands of rockets and missiles, but only a handful even attempted (without success) to target Israel's ships or offshore platforms.

Israel's nearby Mediterranean port of Ashdod and key facilities (the pipeline terminal, power station, and desalination plant) in Ashkelon, by contrast, did come under serious attacks from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, yet most were off-course or intercepted by the Iron Dome and other defenses. For the foreseeable future, the combination of Israeli deterrence and self-defense, plus enhanced Egyptian coordination in containing Hamas, can be expected to limit this threat, at least in the direct Mediterranean theater.

Iran, by comparison, already has significantly greater capabilities, and correspondingly much larger ambitions, in the same arena. It has some access to ports in both Syria and Lebanon and occasionally transits the Suez Canal as well. Still, it has only once or twice reportedly acted directly against Israeli maritime targets in the Mediterranean, where its power position remains relatively weak.

Iran does supply both Hamas (as well as its sidekick, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon with weapons, money, and training. In the event of any major renewed military confrontations, some of that supply would certainly be used against Israeli coast and offshore installations once more. For the moment, however, Iran is more focused on other fronts and, of course, is concerned about Israeli retaliation; Iran therefore appears likely to prefer restraint by its clients—unless it needs them to respond to Israeli actions against its own (nuclear) infrastructure.

Russia, too, is more focused these days on other fronts: Central Asia, Syria, Turkey, Europe in general, and above all Ukraine. It is thus more actively engaged in the Black Sea than in what Arabs call the White Sea, i.e., the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Russia is also a Mediterranean power, with major port access in Syria and continual fleet exercises well beyond it. Its mercenaries are deeply engaged in Libya, and it is trying hard to increase its arms-sale and overall profile in Egypt and elsewhere. In general, though, all these activities do not appear likely to threaten or undermine the more stable relations currently prioritized by the regional powers.

Much the same can be said about China, which is sharply increasing its own presence and profile all over the world, including the Mediterranean, from Israel to Egypt to Morocco. The East Med, in particular, is a key terminus of the "Belt and Road Initiative," which has become central to Chinese overseas policy. Much of that, unlike the Russian case, still lies in the commercial, cultural, and infrastructure/investment spheres, rather than the military realm. In any case, China typically tries (and succeeds) to avoid entanglement in regional disputes, by refusing to take sides. For these reasons, China's inroads along the Mediterranean, while well worth watching, cannot reasonably for now be considered destabilizing.

## Conclusion

The big moving picture of East Med geopolitics is staying on the more stable course first charted over a year ago. This is not, however, a tectonic shift toward enduring or comprehensive practical cooperation. In part, the relevant economic, technical, and environmental inputs for cooperation ironically have become more constraining, just when the political ones have opened up. A final irony is that all this economic uncertainty and environmental caution, along with political upheaval on other continents, have actually dampened investment and driven energy prices through the roof again in recent months.

In some other world, economic uncertainty and environmental caution might have made major new East Med oil and gas ventures, including creative joint ventures among erstwhile regional rivals or corporate competitors, appear more feasible and profitable. But few foresaw the current calm in the region—and none can confidently count on its continuation. As a result, while the worst-case major conflict scenarios of a few years ago are in abeyance, the best-case ones of transformative cooperation are also still out of reach.

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