

## **THE ISLAND OF CYPRUS IN A FLUCTUATING REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT: A TURKISH CYPRIOT PERSPECTIVE**

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Over the past few years, Cyprus has been located at the foci of increased tensions over the development and exploration of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Interest over Eastern Mediterranean gas has not only drawn regional attention by the littoral states, but also promptly attracted global attention by bringing European Union (EU) and the growing influence of the US and Russia to the fore.

The island of Cyprus is cohabited by its two politically equal founding communities – Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots – who both have legal rights in the sharing and exploitation of the island’s natural resources. Despite this fact, which was endorsed under the international treaties that liberated Cyprus from British colonial rule in 1960, recent developments have demonstrated that the Greek Cypriots –who claim to be the sole representative of the island to the detriment of the Turkish Cypriots –have unilaterally resorted to pursuing an assertive engagement policy in inking agreements over the delimitation of maritime boundaries with some littoral states, with the aim of launching gas exportation and granted licenses to multinational corporations without the consent of the Turkish Cypriot side. The Greek Cypriot administration has also become involved in a newly emerging Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) initiated by Egypt that aims to isolate Turkey from the regional equation.

### **Key Aspects of the East Med Puzzle**

Tensions over gas exploration trace back to 2003, when the Greek Cypriot administration – claiming to act on behalf of the whole island – signed an agreement delineating maritime borders with Egypt only a few months after the publication of the United Nations (UN)-sponsored Annan Plan to end the decades-old Cyprus issue. A similar deal was also finalized with Lebanon in 2007; however, this lacks ratification by the Lebanese Parliament, at Turkey’s request. Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Turkey asked the UN to suspend these moves until a comprehensive settlement was reached; no such suspension has, however, been enacted hitherto.

Four overriding aspects can be detected over the issue of gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. First of all, currently there exist ten parties to the dispute: Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Libya. Some of these

countries have experienced internal conflicts, such as Libya; some have been confronted by an internal war, as in the case of Syria; or have felt the severe effects of the perennial unsettlement of conflicts such as the Cyprus issue, the dispute over the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece; and the prolonged Arab-Israeli Dispute. So, in the context of these ongoing regional instabilities and their unpredictable repercussions, the question remains to what extent the transit route to export the East Med natural gas reserves to Europe or elsewhere is tenable. In other words, without establishing an international platform for settling the Cyprus question, as well as without the normalization of relations between Israel with both Syria and Lebanon, the issue of how to economically exploit East Med gas will remain unresolved.

Secondly, the littoral states have either concluded agreements bilaterally or are signatories of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). What makes the delineation of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean region uncompromising is, therefore, the persistence of old disagreements over the maritime borders of the Greek islands that have geographical proximity to Turkey. On the one hand, Turkey has argued that the mainland of Anatolia has the longest shoreline of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, and has its own continental shelf, which consequently narrows the scope of some of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. In other words, Turkey traditionally claims that the Aegean Sea suggests a *sui generis* character, and the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf are regional issues that cannot be solved via international conventions; rather, a bilateral dialogue between Turkey and Greece is necessary to achieve an “equitable” division. This is the main reason why Turkey is not a signatory country of UNCLOS, unlike Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration. In light of this, the rivalry over East Med gas is also intertwined with both the old and the newly emergent energy and security concerns of the littoral states.

Thirdly, we need to take into account the power transition in the Middle East, which has had immediate spillover effects on bargaining over East Med gas precisely in the post-2010 era. One of the unprecedented repercussions of the series of protests in the Arab world—which first erupted in Tunisia and engulfed most of the Arab countries— were the power alternations as well as the emerging new power equation in favor of the Gulf countries and Israel. Meanwhile, the Greek Cypriot administration’s maritime deal with Israel came at the moment of a historic setback in Turkish-Israeli relations in the aftermath of the 2010 Mavi Marmara raid. In addition, the downfall of Mohammad Morsi, the first popularly elected President of Egypt from the power in a military coup in 2013, which was led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – also has resulted in a deterioration of Turkey-Egypt relations since then. Furthermore, the US’s decision to lift the ban on arms sales to Cyprus also matters within this newly emerging political landscape due to then-Vice President Joe Biden’s visit to the island in 2014, which officially signified it’s the US’s changing perspective on Cyprus as a “strategic partner”. Then in 2019, US President Donald Trump announced the so-called Century’s Peace Plan to resolve the Palestine-Israeli Dispute at the expense of Palestinians.

And more recently, in 2020, two Gulf Arab states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, moved towards normalizing ties with Israel, thereby following both Egypt (in 1979) and Jordan (in 1994) by officially recognizing Israel. Thus, this new regional equation favours Greece, Cyprus and Egypt as well as Israel at the expense of primarily Turkey and other littoral states, and also asserts the de-Arabization of the region ever since the end of the Cold War. The establishment of the EMGF as an ‘anti-Turkey’ bloc, however, lacks other littoral states today: such as Syria and Lebanon.

Last but not least, when the Greek Cypriot administration divided its claimed EEZ into 13 blocks and moved towards finalizing agreements on maritime boundaries and granting licenses to companies, these attempts were considered as a unilateral course of action by the TRNC, as well as Turkey. In other words, as the co-owner of the island’s natural resources, Turkish Cypriots have been left out from the processes of participation and decision-making in the entire process. In parallel, the issue of power-sharing between the two founding communities has also come to the fore and constitutes one of the key chapters in bi-communal peace talks between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaderships. Accordingly, one of the reasons behind the failure of the 2017 Cyprus Conference held in Crans Montana in Switzerland is associated with the Greek Cypriot leadership’s hesitancy to share political power and governance with the Turkish Cypriots.

It must be explicitly acknowledged that unless a settlement to the aforementioned regional issues is achieved, engaging in the exploration and transportation of hydrocarbon reserves is not realistically attainable and more importantly, would not allow the parties to benefit from the East Med gas at the maximum level.

### **The Cyprus Issue at the Core of the Regional and International System**

The Cyprus issue currently appears as a litmus test for the international community as well as the EU. Under the Presidency of Germany and with the active involvement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the EU wanted to act as a moderator over the East Med dispute, the persistent lack of coherence among EU member states towards the Eastern Mediterranean region, however, remains a challenge to achieving a common foreign and security policy. Member states must therefore acknowledge the Eastern Mediterranean region in its entirety with reference to the current dispute over the delimitation of maritime boundaries, gas explorations and drilling; indeed, it must also take a broader view of all regional concerns that prompt engagement by Turkey. These include the ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria, the influx of Syrian refugees across the region, disputes over the Aegean Sea, and the ongoing Cyprus issue.

The Turkish Cypriots recognize the fact that the energy issue wouldn’t act as a blessing for the Cyprus issue until today, but they support a diplomatic initiative based on “equity” that would embolden them to become a part of the entire process. The international community, regional

actors, and the EU need to readdress the fact that Turkish Cypriots will not renounce their rights in the region. What is more, Cyprus is posited at the heart of the perennial conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, the Israel-Iran rivalry and US-Russia competition since the end of the Cold War, which have become intertwined with newly emerging tensions over the ownership of Eastern Mediterranean gas. Having said that, the pathway to resolving disputes over the East Med is not through further polarization and fragmentation of the region, but rather with a multilateral platform which would promote a solution on the basis of “equity”, and thus recognition of all sides’ rights and jurisdiction – including that of Turkish Cypriots.

Following the presidential elections held on 18 October 2020, Mr. Ersin Tatar became the new President of TRNC. One of the main pillars of President Tatar’s election campaign was a strong emphasis on settlement of the Cyprus issue on the basis of the sovereign equality of the two peoples of the island and establishment of a cooperative relationship between these two sides that would be based on two sovereign States. Given such a mandate, it might not come as a surprise that the new leadership in TRNC would pursue a policy in accordance with such a solution. To this end, both Turkey and Turkish Cypriot leadership draw attention to a paradigm shift in terms of peace talks on Cyprus which would bring new alternatives out of the UN parameters.

Based on those principles, Turkish Cypriots have a genuine belief that, if treated correctly, hydrocarbons could play a role in contributing to the atmosphere of peace, cooperation, security and welfare between the two sides, as well as the entire region. To this effect, as the co-owners of the island of Cyprus and its natural resources, the Turkish Cypriot side have proposed to establish a joint ad hoc committee for the joint management and exploitation of hydrocarbons, respectively in 2011, 2012, and 2019. Accordingly, Turkey’s call for a regional conference with the participation of all Mediterranean coastal states is an illustration of such efforts to cultivate collaboration in the region entirely. With sincere, rational and forward-looking approaches based on the developments in Cyprus and the region, it might not be as far as it is thought to be to turn hydrocarbon deposits into a promising area of cooperation, which would serve to the benefit of all, contributing to peace, security, stability and prosperity.