



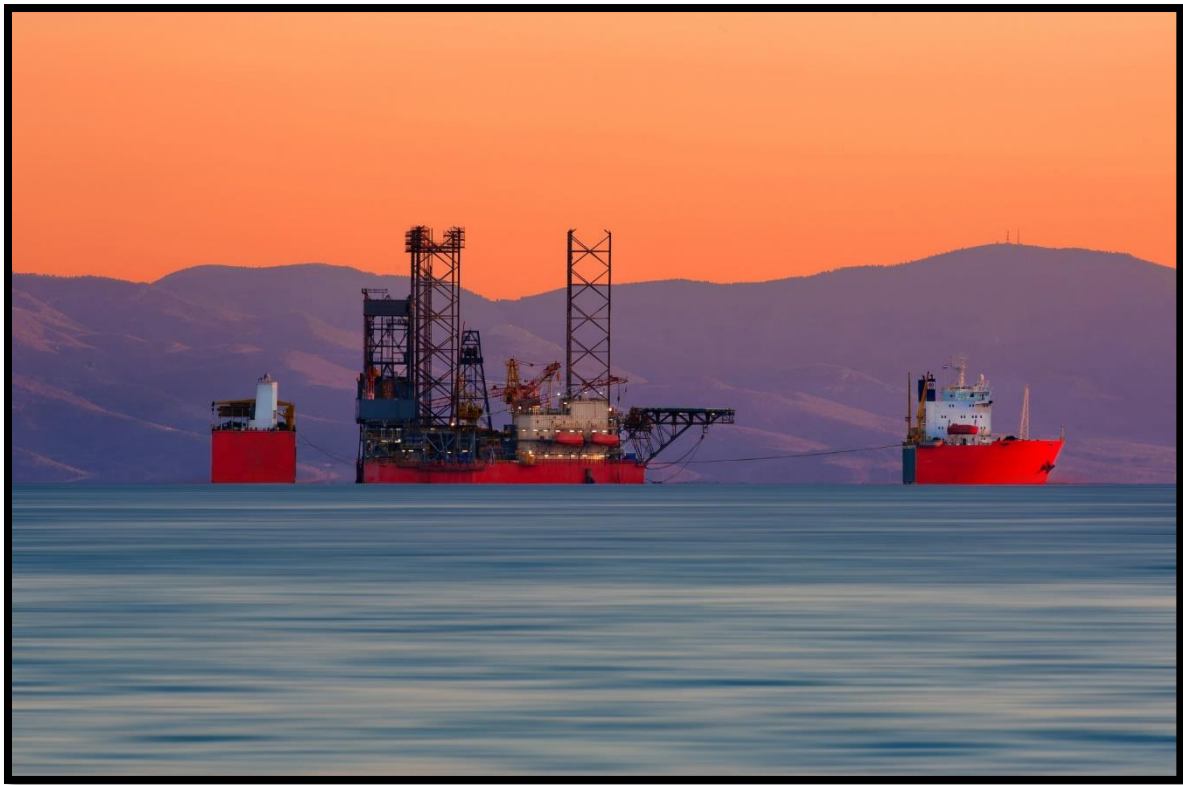
مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
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Reports

The Geopolitics of a Latent International Conflict in Eastern Mediterranean

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Gas Exploration in the eastern Mediterranean [Getty]

Abstract:

The strident objections voiced recently by Greece and Egypt to the deals signed between Turkey and the UN-backed Libyan government is but the latest example of a series of incidents that point to rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey and Libya's Government of National Accord, in control of the western part of the divided, war-torn country, signed in late November two memoranda of understanding on maritime boundaries and military cooperation. The Turkish parliament ratified the pacts on December 5. Although the details of the deals have not yet been announced, both Greece and Egypt considered them illegal.

(1)

In the current scheme of things, the Eastern Mediterranean is sitting atop a dormant volcano. Developments in other hot spots in the Middle East, such as the carnage in Syria, the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian standoff in the Gulf and the civil war in Libya, have diverted the attention away from a latent yet perilous conflict. If triggered, such a conflict could have tremendous ramifications for countries in North Africa, West Asia and Southern Europe as well as for the stability of shipping transportation and energy markets worldwide.

The East Mediterranean's massive hydrocarbon subsea riches, comparable perhaps to the energy resources of the North Sea, could turn the region into "one of the world's most important sources of natural gas over the next half-century." (2) These huge deposits of natural gas, estimated by the US Geological Survey at somewhere between 122tcf and 227tcf (as well as 1.7 billion barrels of oil), could transfer billions of dollars-worth to the coffers of the region's countries. If fully exploited, the dividends carry the potential of transforming the international energy market, reducing Europe's dependence on Russian gas, boosting the economies of the East Mediterranean countries and cutting electricity shortages and brownouts in the region. Major oil discoveries made over the past decade include the gas fields of Aphrodite, Calypso and Glaucus in Cyprus, Tamar and Leviathan in Israel and the giant field Zohr in Egypt.

However, the utilization of these trapped windfalls is faced with a plethora of stumbling blocks and pitfalls. Transport to markets is costly, infrastructure facilities are unavailable and competition with other suppliers of gas (such as Russia, Norway, Qatar and the Caspian Sea) is tough. More significantly, the region is riddled with multiple geopolitical conflicts, fueled by the acrimony of identity politics and the penetration of global powers. The situation is further complicated by two facts: 1) that a wide array of protagonists with conflicting interests, from regional states and superpowers to non-state actors and oil conglomerates, vie for influence and wealth there; 2) that Turkey, which owns the most potent navy in the region, featuring a 194-ship mix of frigates, corvettes, helicopter carriers, and submarines, (3) has insurmountable problems with many of the East Med countries. This paper looks into the geopolitical map of the Eastern Mediterranean, highlighting recent trends, underlying sources of tension, and future scenarios.

Deep Sources of Contention

The monetization of the East Mediterranean's hydrocarbon riches is hampered by two of the world's most protracted geopolitical conflicts, namely the lingering Turkish-Cypriot dispute and the decades-long Arab-Israeli conflict. Since Turkey's invasion of the island in 1974, Cyprus has been divided between the Greek Cypriot Republic in the south (which Ankara never recognized) and a breakaway de facto state in the north, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey. Cyprus reunification talks collapsed, quite dramatically, in 2017. (4) Meanwhile, the animosity between Turkey and Greece, Cyprus's main patron, goes back to the centuries-long Ottoman occupation of Greece. Currently,

Greece is at loggerheads with Turkey over territorial disputes in the Aegean Sea, where both sides nearly came to war in 1987.

Adding insult to injury, Turkey’s political relations with other countries in the region are also fraught with tension. Its ties with Israel were ruptured in 2010 over the pro-Gaza flotilla incident, which involved the death of eight Turks at the hands of Israeli security forces. Although bilateral relations were restored in 2016, they continue to be poisoned over Turkey’s support of Hamas, and the overall divergent regional stances of the two governments. Likewise, Ankara’s relations with Cairo have been severely strained since 2013 because of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s support of Egypt’s former Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, and his detestation of his successor, General-turned-president Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi. Over the past six years, Turkish-Egyptian relations have been ceaselessly marred by a great deal of mistrust, manifested in diplomatic rows, media incitements and expulsions of ambassadors.

Regional stability is also undermined by other bitter feuds. In 2010, for instance, a maritime dispute broke out between Israel and Lebanon, who never had any formal political relations, over a vast sea area of around 850 square kilometers. Tensions between the two countries have erupted several times since. Also, Israel continues to deny Palestinians the right to exploit the gas deposits off the coast of Gaza, magnifying the plight of the impoverished and war-battered region.

Gas Field	Country	Discovery Year	Potential Reserves (trillion cubic feet)
Tamar	Israel	2009	10
Leviathan	Israel	2010	22
Aphrodite	Cyprus	2011	5
Zohr	Egypt	2015	30
Calypso	Cyprus	2018	6-8
Glaucus	Cyprus	2019	5-8

Figure 1: Major Gas Fields in the Eastern Mediterranean

Conflicting Interests, Dangerous Incidents

Eastern Mediterranean stability is predominantly undermined by Turkey's pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy in the region. Evident in both fiery rhetoric and coercive diplomacy, this policy seems to reflect its legal weakness and military might. Turkey's legal posture is not congruent with the tenets of international law, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (to which it is not a signatory). Instead, the Turkish government provides a novel interpretation of maritime boundaries, arguing that ownership of offshore waters should be governed by the continental shelf and that the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of an island, such as Cyprus, is limited to only twelve nautical miles of territorial waters.⁽⁵⁾ Further, while Cyprus has bolstered its legal posture by signing maritime border agreements with Egypt, Lebanon and Israel, in 2003, 2007 and 2010, respectively, Turkey reached no such agreements with its Mediterranean neighbors.

Politically, Turkey's motives are numerous. Having the longest shoreline in the Eastern Mediterranean, it considers the sea to be vital for both its internal security and its power projection plans in the entire Middle East. However, facing a group of allied adversaries, especially the fledgling Greek-Egyptian-Cypriot partnership, it feels marginalized and threatened. ⁽⁶⁾ Economic gains are also at stake. A major gas transit route from Central Asia to Europe, Turkey wishes to also become an energy hub that links East Mediterranean's gas fields to European markets, lessening in the process its own reliance on Russian energy imports.⁽⁷⁾ To assert its presence and thwart Greek-Cypriot efforts, Turkey has deployed two drilling ships, Fatih and Yavuz, and a seismic ship, Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa, to the west, east and south of the Cypriot island.⁽⁸⁾ Moreover, Turkey's military ships intercepted an Eni vessel off the eastern coast of Cyprus in 2018, reportedly threatening "to sink it."⁽⁹⁾



Energy Ministers' Meeting in January 2019 [Getty]

Both Brussels and Washington are candidly supportive of Cyprus. In response to Ankara's muscle-flexing moves, the EU levied sanctions on Turkey, reducing financial assistance and halting high-level talks with Ankara. (10) Likewise alarmed by the detrimental effect the tension in the East Mediterranean could have on European security, the United States has engaged more heavily in the crisis, throwing in its lot with the Greek-Cypriot side. In a sign of intensive cooperation, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with his Greek counterpart three times in the span of three months (between last August and November). (11) Pompeo also announced that he had warned the Turks that "illegal drilling is unacceptable," emphatically adding that "no country can hold Europe hostage." (12) Anti-Turkey sentiments are also prevalent in the US Congress. In April, Senators Marco Rubio and Bob Menendez put forward a bipartisan legislation that aims to support the partnership of Cyprus, Greece and Israel and take punitive measures against Turkey. (13)

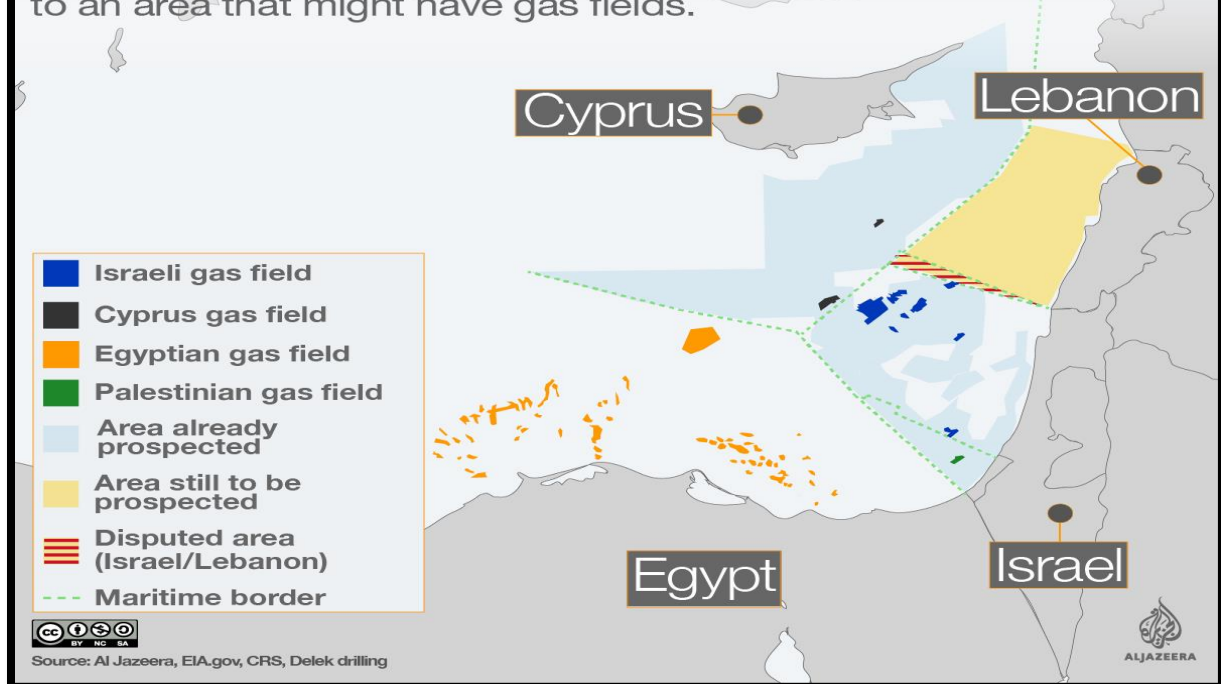
However, the Turkish leadership is still adamant on pursuing a defiant policy, underpinned by fervent rhetoric and gunboat diplomacy. In response to the EU sanctions, Turkey decided to double its operations off Cypriot coasts by sending more drillships to the area. Ramping up rhetoric, Turkish President Erdogan said that his country is determined to protect the interests and rights of Turkish Cypriots in the East Mediterranean, warning that Turkey "will not allow these interests to be usurped by those who have no business (there)." (14)

In the same vein, his Energy Minister, Fatih Donmez, emphasized that Turkey “never surrenders to any threats, and it never will.” (15) Also, Turkey’s Foreign Minister said, “We have three vessels [in the region] and we will send the fourth ... What we will do in our own continental shelf, we decide.”(16) Ankara went as far as “declaring no-go zones” for Greek Cypriot ships in local waters.(17) Ratcheting up tensions, Cyprus in response issued arrest warrants for the crew of a Turkish drillship, the Fatih, anchored west of Cyprus and, earlier this month, Greece dispatched naval forces to the contested area.(18)

Concomitant with the Greek-Cypriot-Turkish encounter, the ebbing and flowing of tensions between Israel and Lebanon have become sort of a normalcy. In 2010, Israel’s Minister of National Infrastructures Uzi Landau warned in an interview with Bloomberg that Israel “will not hesitate to use force” to protect its interests and defend its newly-discovered gas fields. (19) In response, Lebanon’s Energy and Water Resources Minister said that Israel “will pay the price” if it violates the Law of the Sea Convention. (20) Heated rhetoric erupted again in February 2018. Hassan Nasrallah, the pugnacious leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, warned Israel at the time that its oil facilities could be targeted, and stopped from working “within hours,” if necessary. (21) Lebanon’s Supreme Defense Council gave its full backing to Hezbollah’s military preparations.(22) In a sign of apprehension about attacks against its gas installations, Israel suspended the transfer of gas from the Tamar field to the Ashdod gas rig when tensions between Israel and Hamas rose in May 2019. (23)

Natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean

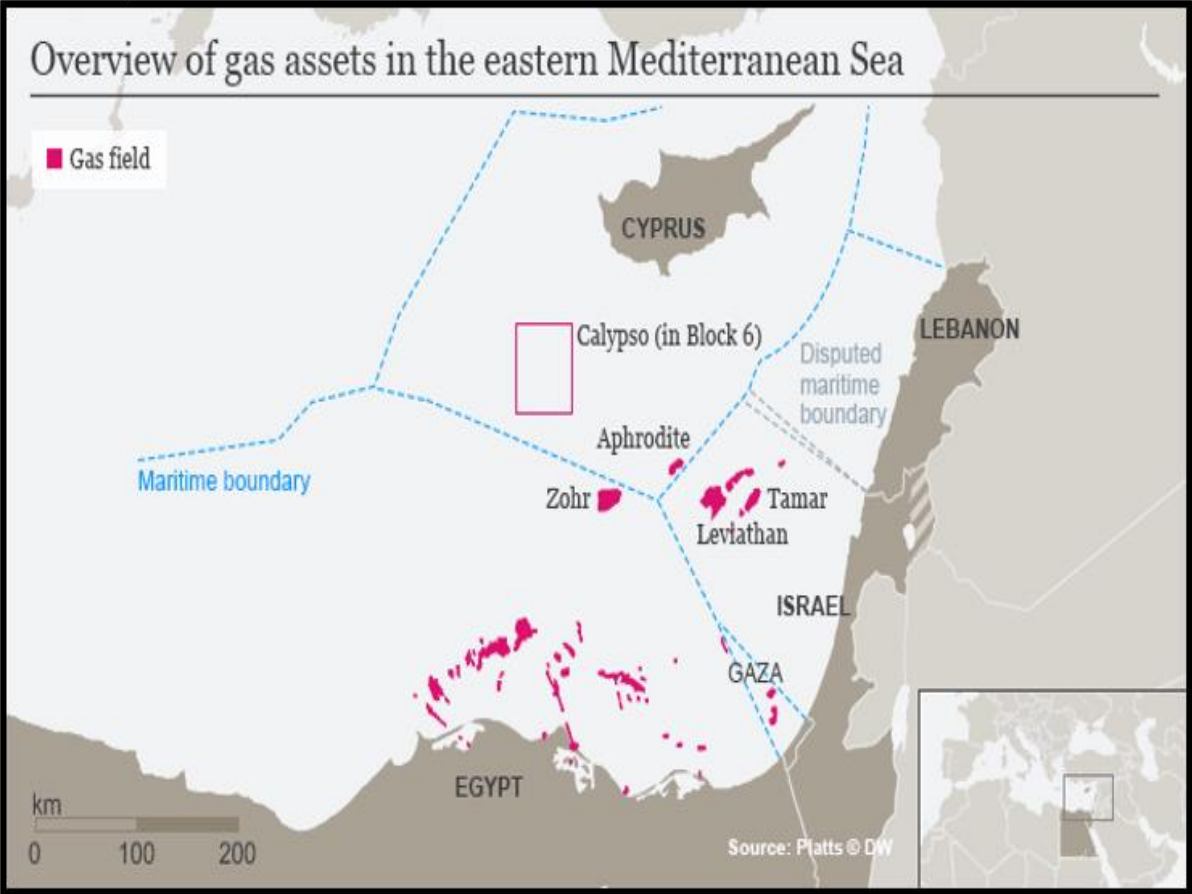
Natural gas reserves are at the centre of a maritime border dispute between Israel and Lebanon. Both countries lay claim to an area that might have gas fields.



Gas resources in eastern Mediterranean [Aljazeera]

The growing militarization of the region, which takes the form of huge arms procurements and routine exercises, is also a bad omen. Turkey's exploratory ships are already accompanied by "a growing flotilla of Turkish naval vessels, submarines, drones, and patrol craft."⁽²⁴⁾ For nine days in February and March, Turkey's military conducted what it claimed was "the largest naval exercise in its history" in the Black Sea, Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.⁽²⁵⁾ Likewise, Egypt has since 2014 carried out several military drills with Greece, one of which took place just twelve miles from the coast of Turkey. Cyprus began participating in these training exercises since 2018. ⁽²⁶⁾ In parallel, Cyprus and Israel conduct joint military exercises on a regular basis. An arms race is simultaneously raging in the region. Egypt, the world's third top arms importer in 2014-8,⁽²⁷⁾ boosted its military presence in the Mediterranean in the past few years, purchasing amphibious assault ships, submarines and corvettes.⁽²⁸⁾ And while Greece took strenuous efforts to upgrade its navy, acquiring frigates, submarines, fast patrol boats and multi-purpose helicopters,⁽²⁹⁾ Turkey considers deploying its recently-purchased S-400 air defense missile system along its southern coast "near its vessels exploring for energy in the Mediterranean."⁽³⁰⁾

Perilously, the rise in levels of political tension, within the framework of contested sovereignties, undemarcated maritime borders and overlapping licenses granted to oil companies to operate in similar zones, creates a situation that runs the risk of maritime accidents. In 2013, a political scholar warned that “inadvertent escalation due to incidents at sea is becoming an increasingly probable scenario [in the Mediterranean] ... even a minor incident or provocation might be mistaken for an act of aggression.” (31) Also, a 2018 report, issued by NATO’s Allied Maritime Command, warned that the Eastern Mediterranean “is extremely busy militarily ... There are numerous warships operating in the region.” (32)



Overview of Gas Assets in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea [Source: Sergio Matalucci]

How Good is the Good News?

Against the background of this protracted set of frictions, two ostensibly positive developments took place in the region in 2019. In January, seven states (Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority) sought to give institutional shape to their energy strategies by establishing the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). In their initial declaration, the signatories affirmed that the forum would help member states “monetize their reserves, utilize their existing infrastructure, and build new ones as necessary for the benefit and welfare of their people.” (33) Nevertheless, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey were excluded from the forum. Inter-member energy cooperation had already been deepened

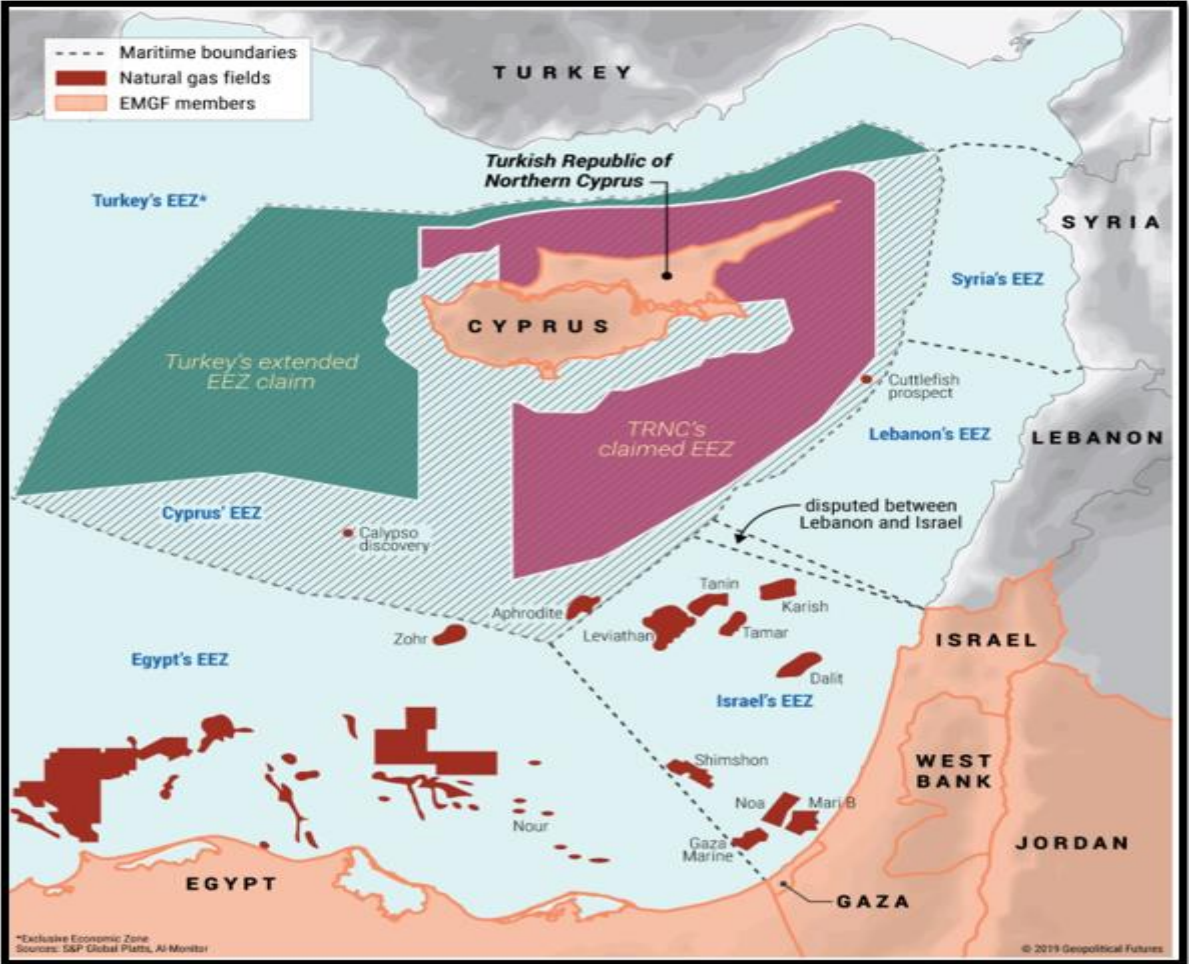
prior to the establishment of the forum. Egypt and Israel strengthened their energy collaboration in recent years. Natural gas from the Israeli fields of Tamar and Leviathan is slated to begin flowing to Egypt on Jan. 1, according to a \$15 billion deal signed in 2018 and recently enlarged to the tune of a whopping \$19.5 billion. (34) Israel had also reportedly signed a \$10 billion gas deal with Jordan in 2016.

Then in June, assiduous US efforts, led by senior diplomat David Satterfield, culminated in reaching an initial agreement to launch US-mediated talks between Israel and Lebanon concerning the division of undersea energy reserves. Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri reportedly told lawmakers in June that there was "clear progress" on efforts to bridge differences between the two countries. (35) Then, in August, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri confirmed his country's "commitment" to the US-mediated negotiation process, adding that he considered the process "to be viable." (36)

The promised yields of these developments should, however, be taken with a pinch of salt. First, the composition of the EMGF perpetuates underlying polarizations rather than alleviates regional tensions, let alone provides a clear roadmap for solving the current deadlock. In fact, the forum looks, in essence, like an anti-Turkish axis. As the history of international relations incessantly showed us, inked documents that do not address grievances or reflect extant configurations of power are no guarantee for upholding regional stability. This is particularly true in regions like the Middle East, where the rules of realpolitik, more often than not, carry the day, legal rights and privileges notwithstanding.

Secondly, the thaw in Israel's relations with Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt should not be overestimated. Israel's detention of Jordanian citizens led Amman in late October to recall its ambassador from Tel Aviv. There's also popular anger in Jordan over the gas deal, and bilateral relations are generally, in the words of a former Israeli diplomat, at a "very low ebb." (37) Also, the current turmoil in Lebanon, now in its second month, has paralyzed the country. The continued cabinet interregnum erodes the ability of its acting prime minister to pursue, let alone conclude, controversial peace deals. On the other hand, Egyptian-Israeli ties are thriving, but only on the official level. Public antipathy towards Israel is still widespread. If given the right to self-expression, as in the revolutionary years of 2011-2013, Egypt's public opinion will likely induce pressure to reverse the process.

To be sure, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean are part and parcel of the festering social and political ills that continue to afflict the entire Middle East. Indeed, a large arc of chronic conflict and instability has taken roots in the wider area surrounding the East Mediterranean. The area stretching from Iran to North Africa is plagued today by a jumbled mix of deep socioeconomic grievances, time-bomb demographics, simmering armed conflicts, intense sectarian cleavages, raging civil wars (Syria, Yemen) and failed states (e.g. Libya, Syria, Yemen). It also includes militant non-state actors and diehard terrorists on a rampage across porous borders (e.g. ISIS, Al-Qaeda), waves of immigrant influxes, networks of organized crime and arms trafficking, arms races and high levels of internal upheaval and external penetration. The Middle East, including the East Mediterranean, therefore fits the VUCA status, a notion articulated in 1987 by the US Army War College to describe a world, or geographic region, characterized by the toxic mishmash of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.



Natural Gas Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean [Source: “Natural Gas Cooperation in the Eastern Med”, Geopolitical Futures, 22 November 2019]

Conclusion

By dint of its pivotal location, at the intersection of three continents and linked to vital waterways such as the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus, the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial for the security of the Middle East and Europe. Recent developments in the region pose an overt threat to regional stability. An all-out military confrontation may be ruled out now, but sabre-rattling, limited military skirmishes and accidents are, no doubt, plausible. Turkey's bellicosity is expected to rise so long as other parties feverishly endeavor to exploit energy resources at its exclusion. As a Middle East analyst put it, "the closer we get to a potential exploitation of offshore resources prior to a reconciliation ... the bolder Turkey's actions are going to be." (38) In the absence of confidence-building measures or serious mediation efforts promoted by adept peacekeepers, violence will continue to loom across the horizon. Albeit still inchoate, the EMGF does not appear to be a viable solution. Rather than assembling the fragments of an explosive region or acting as a bulwark against further destabilization, as some commentaries elatedly promised, the forum, at best, buries the vast differences among contending parties under the rug; at worst, it reproduces them.

The explosions on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and the missile assault on the ARAMCO installations in Saudi Arabia, which occurred last June and September, respectively, was a reminder that the impact of brinkmanship policies, not unusual in the region, can have a very detrimental effect on the stability of energy markets. Without effective, balanced and binding political agreements that involve all parties of the Eastern Mediterranean, energy installations and shipping vessels will remain vulnerable. Any trouble or mishap in the region will send shockwaves through an already volatile region.

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