



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

# **The New Strategic Equation in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Efraim Inbar



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 109

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**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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# The New Strategic Equation in the Eastern Mediterranean

*Efraim Inbar*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For centuries, the Mediterranean Sea was the main arena for international interactions, before it was replaced by the Atlantic Ocean and subsequently by the Pacific. Nevertheless, as the historical meeting place between East and West, the East Mediterranean was the focus of significant superpower competition during the Cold War and still has strategic significance. Indeed, the East Mediterranean is an arena from which it is possible to project force into the Middle East. It is the location of important East-West routes such as the Silk Road and the Suez Canal (on the way to the Gulf and India). In addition, the region is the focal point for many important international issues, with radical Islam, international terrorism and nuclear proliferation embedded in its regional politics.

This article initially reviews the breakdown of the Pax Americana in the 21st Century in the Eastern Mediterranean and the emerging strategic landscape with the transformation from a unipolar to a multi-polar subsystem. Subsequently, the article analyzes the strategic implications of this new predicament: Increased Russian presence and Turkish activism, the potential for more terrorism, increasing conflict over energy, and the emergence of a Cypriot-Greek-Israeli axis. The erosion in the statist order along the shores of the Mediterranean brings to the forefront Islamic forces that add a civilizational dimension to the discord in this region. The article concludes with a review of the ramifications of the developing situation for Israel and with several policy recommendations.



# The New Strategic Equation in the Eastern Mediterranean

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## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the Mediterranean Sea was the main arena for international interactions, before it was replaced by the Atlantic Ocean and subsequently by the Pacific. Nevertheless, as the historical meeting place between East and West, the East Mediterranean was the focus of significant superpower competition during the Cold War and still has strategic significance. Indeed, the East Mediterranean is an arena from which it is possible to project force into the Middle East. It is the location of important East-West routes such as the Silk Road and the Suez Canal (on the way to the Gulf and India). The Levant, known as the ‘cradle of civilization’, is also blessed/cursed with religious sites that attract much international attention. In addition, the region is the focal point for many important international issues, with radical Islam, international terrorism and nuclear proliferation embedded in its regional politics.

The region, very diverse ethnically and religiously, is marred by many conflicts. Yet, all political elites share a realpolitik prism of international relations generally harboring the perception of a high level of threat. Moreover, the use of force is believed to be a real option in their policy menu.

The geographical unit generally known as the East Mediterranean is located east of 20° meridian and includes the littoral states of Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Gaza (a *de facto* independent political

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unit), Egypt, Libya and divided Cyprus. The region has two choke points: the Bosphorus Straits and the Suez Canal. The first has traditionally constrained Russian influence, while the other controls Europe's trade route to the Gulf, and South and East Asia. The East Mediterranean is also important in terms of energy transit. Close to 5 percent of the global oil supply and up to 15 percent of the global liquefied natural gas travels via the Suez Canal, while Turkey hosts close to 6 percent of the global oil trade via the Bosphorus Straits and two international pipelines.

The discovery of new offshore oil and gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea is a promising energy development. Yet, these resources could become the source of new conflicts in an already volatile region. Most of the currently known deposits in the Levant Basin lie off the coast of Israel, and in adjacent fields off Cyprus, but there is a potential for additional findings offshore in Syria, Lebanon and Gaza. While the currently recognized volumes are small in relation to those found in the Persian Gulf, Russia, or the Caspian Sea Basin, they are large enough to have a significant impact on the development of states in the Eastern Mediterranean, and are likely to make a contribution, albeit small, to energy security in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

For Israel, becoming energy independent and a significant exporter of gas confers significant economic advantages, but these chances are linked to Israel's ability to secure free passage for its maritime trade and to defend these newly discovered hydrocarbon fields. Moreover, about 90 percent of Israel's foreign trade is carried out via the Mediterranean, making freedom of navigation in this area critical for Israel's economic well-being. Whilst turmoil in the Arab world has generally improved Israel's strategic environment by weakening its foes (Iran is an exception), the East Mediterranean arena has become more problematic.

Since the end of the Cold War period this area has largely benefited from a Pax Americana. But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. This article will first review the breakdown of the Pax Americana in the 21st Century in the Eastern Mediterranean and the emerging strategic landscape with the transformation from a unipolar to a multi-polar subsystem. Subsequently, the article analyzes the strategic implications of this new predicament: Increased Russian presence and Turkish activism,

the potential for more terrorism, increasing conflict over energy, and the emergence of a Cypriot-Greek-Israeli axis. The erosion in the statist order along the shores of the Mediterranean brings to the forefront Islamic forces that add a civilizational dimension to the discord in this region.<sup>2</sup> The article concludes with a review of the ramifications of the developing situation for Israel and with several policy recommendations.

## **THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE BREAKDOWN**

In the post-Cold War period, the West gained dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean primarily because of US military and political dominance. For a while, the naval presence of the Sixth Fleet was unrivalled.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Washington also managed the region through the use of a web of alliances with regional powers. Most prominent were two trilateral relationships with powerful regional actors, which had their origins in the Cold War: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel.<sup>4</sup> This security architecture has since broken down. While the US still is a powerful actor, its influence seemed to dwindle in the region, the triangular relations went sour, and the turmoil in the Arab world led to significant changes in domestic and regional politics.

### ***The Decline in Us Influence***

Developments in the Middle East since 2011 underscore the erosion of the position of the US in the region. This is partly due to the foreign policy of the Barack H. Obama administration that can be characterized as a deliberate, “multilateral retrenchment...designed to curtail the United States’ overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners.”<sup>5</sup> It is also partly due to its confused, contradictory and inconsistent responses to the unfolding events of the “Arab Spring.”<sup>6</sup> First, there was a quick demand to oust Hosni Mubarak, an action unequivocally viewed in the region as the betrayal of a loyal friend and ally. Then the American criticism of Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in support of the Sunni ruling Al-Khalifa family in Bahrain (March 2011) raised eyebrows in Arab capitals.<sup>7</sup> Similarly puzzling

was Washington's response to Muammar Gaddafi's domestic troubles, leaving the initiative for his removal to its West European allies. The desertion of Gaddafi, who cooperated with the West by giving up his arsenal of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in 2003, was also met with surprise. Consequently, Washington failed to grasp that its attitude toward Libya taught many of the leaders in the region that it is better to stick with their WMD programs in order to prevent a Western military intervention. In contrast, the brutal suppression of the local opposition by the anti-American regimes in Iran and Damascus elicited only mild criticism from the Obama administration.

American support for the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the lukewarm attitude toward Egypt's military coup (July 2013) that removed the Islamist regime also bewildered America's friends in the region. Furthermore, the ill-conceived pledge of military action in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons by Assad, and the subsequent political acrobatics to avoid following through, elicited much ridicule.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by the November 2013 nuclear deal, hammered out between US-led P5+1 and Iran, that allowed the Islamic Republic to continue enriching uranium, as well as developing its weaponization and missiles delivery systems, which was generally viewed in the littoral states in the East Mediterranean (and elsewhere) as a great diplomatic victory for Iran. Saudi Arabia and other allies in the region are worried that the US has turned its back on them as part of Obama's pursuit of détente with Iran.<sup>9</sup> The regional leaders have seen America retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan, engage (or appease) its enemies, Iran and Syria, and desert friendly rulers. All this has strengthened the general perception of a weak and confused American foreign policy.

The US, drained by two protracted wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) and flushed with new energy finds, does not want to be dragged into further conflicts in a Middle East that seems no longer so central to its interests. Apparently, as it edges towards energy independence, the US is losing interest in the East Mediterranean and the adjacent Middle East. As the technology to exploit America's vast shale gas and oil reserves ripens, the US could free itself from dependence on oil imports from the Middle East. Since 2008, the US began to cut its oil imports, partly due to growing fuel efficiency and a concurrent drop in consumption

due to the recession, and partly because of growing domestic oil and gas production.<sup>10</sup> US oil production has risen by 60 percent since 2008. Its gas production has risen by 25 percent since 2010, making the US the largest gas producer in the world.<sup>11</sup>

This development was followed by President Obama announcing in November 2011 the Rebalance to Asia policy, for economic and political reasons.<sup>12</sup> The rise of China is understandably a sufficient strategic reason for the reinforcement of US military presence in Asia. While little has been done to implement the pivoting to Asia policy, the budgetary cuts in the US defense budget clearly indicate that such a priority will be at the expense of US presence elsewhere, including the East Mediterranean and the Middle East. A strong permanent US naval presence in the Mediterranean dwindled after the end of the Cold War and the mounting needs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> While the US is still capable of acting in the East Mediterranean, the general perception of the actors in the region is that the Obama administration lacks the political will and skills to do so.

The possibility that the European allies in NATO or the European Union will fill the American role in the East Mediterranean is not taken seriously. Europe is not a real strategic actor, since it lacks the necessary military assets, a clear strategic vision, as well as the political will to replace the American role.<sup>14</sup> While France and Italy are Mediterranean powers, they are unlikely to become a security provider for the East Mediterranean.

### ***The Disruption of The Trilateral Security Arrangements***

The American-Israel-Turkey triangle was a tremendous force for stability. Turkey has been a central pillar in US policy toward the East Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia. The United States' longstanding support for Turkey assumed that it could become a "moderate Islam" role model that would successfully synthesize Islam and modernity, while preserving a pro-Western orientation and maintaining a strategic relationship with Israel. In the post-Cold War era Turkey entered into a strategic partnership with Israel, which was encouraged by the US.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the two strongest allies of the US

in the East Mediterranean closely cooperated on strategic and military issues mattered greatly for US interests in the region.

Yet, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey since its electoral victory of November 2002 led to a reorientation in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey, under the AKP, distanced itself from the West and has developed ambitions to lead the Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> With Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at its helm, Turkey supports Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, helps Iran and Russia evade sanctions, assists Sunni radical elements in moving into Syria and mulls an invasion of Syria. Furthermore, the regime displays increasing authoritarianism and propagates anti-American and anti-Semitic conspiracies.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Turkey's membership in NATO became problematic, particularly after contracting a Chinese firm to build its long-range air and anti-missile defense architecture.<sup>18</sup> This policy, fueled by Ottoman and Islamist impulses, led to an activist approach toward the Middle East and also to strains in the relationship with Israel.<sup>19</sup> This became evident following the May 2010 attempt of a Turkish vessel, the *Mavi Marmara*, to break the Israeli naval blockade of Gaza. In October 2010, Turkey's National Security Council even identified Israel as one of the country's main threats in its official document called the Red Book. These developments fractured one of the foundations upon which US policy rested in the Eastern Mediterranean since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even if an Erdoğan-led Turkey will restore full diplomatic relations with Israel in order to normalize relations, the close strategic cooperation between the two states is unlikely to be revived.

Stability in the East Mediterranean benefited also from the American-Egyptian-Israeli triangle, which started when Egypt, under President Anwar Sadat, decided in the 1970s to switch to a pro-American orientation and subsequently to make peace with Israel (1979). Egypt, the largest Arab state, is a pivotal player in the region, carrying much weight in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa. Egypt's defection from the Soviet bloc and from the anti-Israel Arab coalition seriously improved the US position. Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, continued the pro-American stance during the post-Cold War era. The meeting of interests among the US, Egypt and Israel served, *inter alia*, to maintain the Pax Americana in the East Mediterranean.

Yet, the American-Egyptian-Israeli triangular relationship has been under strain after the removal of Mubarak in July 2011. While Egypt's military continued its cooperation with Israel to maintain the military clauses of the 1979 peace treaty, the Muslim Brotherhood that came to power via the ballot box was extremely reserved towards relations with Israel, which it considered theologically as an aberration. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood basically held anti-American sentiments, which were muted somewhat by realpolitik requirements, primarily by the unexpected support lent by the Obama administration.<sup>20</sup>

The intervention of Egypt's military to remove the Muslim Brotherhood regime (July 2013) further undermined the trilateral relationship, as the US regarded it as an "undemocratic" development. Washington even partially suspended its assistance to Egypt (October 2013), causing additional strain in relations with Cairo. This came on the heels of Obama's cancellation of the Bright Star joint military exercise and the Pentagon's withholding of the delivery of four F-16s and ten Apache helicopters.<sup>21</sup> Despite the pronouncements of the importance and strength of the US-Egypt partnership, the flow of money has now been tied to "credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically-elected civilian government through free and fair elections."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, in Egypt, the US has come to be increasingly viewed as hostile, rather than as a partner or model.<sup>23</sup> Israeli diplomatic efforts to convince Washington to refrain from acting on its democratic missionary zeal were only partially successful.<sup>24</sup> These developments hampered the potential for useful cooperation between Cairo, Jerusalem and Washington. The misguided attempts of the US to mediate between Hamas and Israel during Operation Protective Edge (August 2014) by proposing the reliance on Turkey and Qatar, instead of supporting the Cairo initiative, further undermined American-Egyptian relations.

### ***Growing Islamist Presence on the Shores of the East Mediterranean***

The turmoil in the Arab world is transforming the strategic landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, where elements of radical Islam are increasingly strengthening their power. Arab states have difficulties in sustaining statist structures □ allowing for Islamist political forces to

exercise ever greater influence. Indeed, along Mediterranean shores, Libya, Egypt, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and (non-Arab) Turkey display Islamist tendencies, threatening the current unrestricted access to this area by Israel and the West.<sup>25</sup>

In Libya, evolving political events after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi indicate that radical Islamic elements play a great role in the future of the country. The transition to a new regime has not assured stability. Libya remains chaotic three years after the initial uprising against Gaddafi. The current chaos that might lead to the disintegration of the state allows greater freedom of action for Muslim extremists from the shores of this Mediterranean country.<sup>26</sup>

Libya's eastern neighbor, Egypt, is once again ruled by the military, but it is premature to conclude that the Islamist elements, that have had a taste of power for over a year, have succumbed to play a secondary role in the emerging Egyptian political system. They still send multitudes into the streets of Egyptian cities, trying to destabilize the new military regime. Apart from having important ports on the Mediterranean, Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, a critical passageway linking Europe to the Persian Gulf and the Far East that could fall into the hands of the Islamists.

Even if the Egyptian military is able to curtail the Islamist forces at home, its grip over the Sinai Peninsula is tenuous since the fall of the Mubarak regime. Under General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Egyptian attempts to dislodge the Sunni jihadists roaming the Sinai Peninsula have increased, but so far full Egyptian sovereignty has not been attained. This could lead to the "Somalization" of Sinai, negatively affecting the safety of naval trade along the Mediterranean, as well as the approaches to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. At the same time, nearby Gaza is currently controlled by Hamas, a radical Islamist organization allied with Iran. Israel's enforced naval blockade on Gaza has been increasingly criticized by the international community. Thus, containment of the Islamist threat from Gaza remains a serious challenge.

North of Israel, along the Mediterranean coast, sits Lebanon, a state dominated by radical Shiite Hizballah, whose ports are inhospitable from a Western perspective. Hizballah has already laid claim to some of the

Israeli-found gas fields in the sea which could diminish Europe's energy dependence on Russia and Turkey. Moreover, Syria, an enemy of Israel and a long-time ally of Iran, exerts considerable influence in Lebanon. Its Mediterranean shores, north of Lebanon, are also hostile to the West and its ports even supply services to the Russian navy. While the Assad regime in Syria faces great domestic opposition and may fall, any Syrian successor regime could be Islamist and anti-Western as well.

The next state on the Eastern Mediterranean coastline is AKP-ruled Turkey. As aforementioned, the country has, over the past few years, shifted away from a pro-Western foreign policy. The Turkish government supports Hamas and Hizballah, opposes sanctions on Iran, and holds a strident anti-Israel position, which reflects the AKP's Islamic coloration. Moreover, Turkey has displayed ambitions for leadership in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. A combination of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic-jihadist impulses has pushed Turkey into an aggressive posture on several regional issues.

For instance, Turkey has threatened Cyprus regarding its desire to acquire a share of the potential energy riches south of the island. Turkey is interested in gaining control or partial ownership over the maritime gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, as this would limit its energy dependence on Russia and Iran and would help fulfill its ambitions to serve as an energy bridge to the West, thereby creating dependence on itself instead. This puts Ankara at loggerheads with Nicosia and Jerusalem, who share an interest in developing the hydrocarbon fields in their exclusive economic zones and exporting gas to energy-thirsty Europe. Indeed, Ankara also flexed its naval muscles by threatening Israel that it will try to break the blockade on Gaza by escorting flotillas.

West of Turkey is Greece, a democratic Western state with a stake in the protection of the Greek Cypriots from Muslim domination. However, its current economic troubles erode its limited military ability to parry the Turkish challenge alone. Many Eastern Mediterranean states would likely favor the return of Cyprus to Turkish (and Muslim) rule. This development reflects the civilizational aspect in the emerging balance of power.

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The American security architecture in the East Mediterranean has collapsed and its position has been weakened; several littoral states are fraught with instability; and radical Islamic groups have gained greater influence. The East Mediterranean of today experiences a power vacuum and displays an uncertain future. Several strategic implications are noteworthy: a resurgence of Russian influence; the potential for Turkish aggression; the emergence of an Israeli-Greek-Cypriot axis; an enhanced terrorist threat; a greater Iranian ability to project power in the region; and the potential for wars over gas fields. These will be expanded on below.

### *Russian Encroachment*

The power vacuum makes it easier for Russia to recapture some of its lost influence after the end of the Cold War. Russia apparently is deploying, and intends to continue to deploy, its navy into the vacuum created by the US absence in the Mediterranean.<sup>27</sup> The regional NATO navies have also been suffering for years an inexorable decline. The French and Italian naval orders of battle are shadows of their former selves, while NATO's Standing Maritime Groups are spending less time in the Mediterranean. This is partly attributable to diminishing inventories, and also to NATO's counter piracy Operation Ocean Shield, conducted in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. America's European allies are also more willing to leave the theater because NATO proclaimed that the European theater has diminished in strategic importance.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, Russia has managed to retain its Tartus naval base on the coast of a war-torn Syria, has gradually improved its fleet size and stepped up patrols in the East Mediterranean, roughly coinciding with the escalation of tensions in Syria. During 2013, the Black Sea Fleet conducted 17 operational voyages and 39 port visits in the Mediterranean, spending 650 days at sea.<sup>29</sup> Russia's newfound military footprint in the Eastern Mediterranean is underscored by multiple naval exercises it has conducted, some of which involved more than 20 warships and submarines, war-gaming against terrorism scenarios and disaster management response. During his visit to the Black Sea Fleet in February 2013, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stressed

that the “Mediterranean region was the core of all essential dangers to Russia’s national interests” and that continued fallout from the Arab Spring increased the importance of the region. Shortly thereafter, he announced the decision to establish a Navy Department task force in the Mediterranean “on a permanent basis.”<sup>30</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin pulled off a diplomatic achievement when he offered President Obama a ladder to climb down over the ill-advised announced “red line” on the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria. Russian diplomacy and material support make an important contribution to keeping Bashar al-Assad in power.<sup>31</sup> In the bloody civil war occurring in Syria, Russia is allied with radical Iran.

Russia’s navy also gained full access to a Cypriot port.<sup>32</sup> Cyprus, a member of the EU, but not NATO, is trying to balance greater Turkish activism. Russia is seen as a power able to provide a modicum of deterrence against Turkey. Nicosia is painfully aware that the West is not likely to offer a credible guarantee against potential Turkish aggression.<sup>33</sup> (This is discussed in the next section.)

Significantly, Russia has also increased its leverage in Egypt, the most important Arab state, after the military coup and after the American-Egyptian tensions that resulted in a partial aid freeze. According to many reports, a large arms deal, to the tune of \$2-3 billion, and naval services at the port of Alexandria, were discussed between the two countries at the beginning of 2014. The first trip of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi outside the region (August 2014) was to Moscow in an attempt to close a deal. If these talks indeed lead to a significant arms deal, this would represent an important change in Egyptian policy. In 1974, after Egypt switched from a pro-Soviet orientation to political, military, and economic dependence on the United States, the Soviet Union ceased its weapons supply to Egypt. A decision by the current Egyptian government to sign a large arms deal with Russia implies that it is prepared to change, even to a limited extent, the balance of its relations with the two large powers.<sup>34</sup> Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which seem ready to finance the arms deal, are similarly signaling their displeasure with US foreign policy.

Russia nurtures good relations with other actors in the East Mediterranean. Despite its problems with Muslim radicals at home, Moscow has maintained good relations with Hamas. In contrast to most of the international community that regards Hamas as a terrorist organization, in 2006 Russia invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow to conduct talks.<sup>35</sup> In 2010, together with Turkey, Russia even called to bring Hamas into the diplomatic process in the framework of an attempted Israeli-Palestinian agreement.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Russia - an energy producer - has shown interest in the newly discovered offshore energy fields.<sup>37</sup> In July 2012 President Vladimir Putin visited Israel to discuss, inter alia, the gas fields. The Russian Gazprom has signed a deal with Israel on the future distribution of the large Israeli gas resources, and plans to build a floating facility off Cyprus to convert the product to liquefied natural gas.<sup>38</sup> In December 2013, Russia also signed a 25-year energy deal with Syria that opens the way for Moscow's eventual move into the gas-rich Eastern Mediterranean. This agreement gives Russia's state-controlled oil and gas company, Soyuzneftegas, exclusive exploration, development and production rights to a substantial portion of Syria's off-shore waters (over 850 square miles of Syria's Exclusive Economic Zone in an area known as Block 2, roughly between the coastal cities of Baniyas and Tartus). The deal gives the Russians, one of the world's leading energy producers, their first real foothold in the Levant Basin, which is considered extremely rich in natural gas.<sup>39</sup> Russia has also engaged Cyprus and Israel to help develop and monetize their gas finds. With a financial stake in the energy future of virtually every relevant regional actor, Russia is trying to regain its Soviet-era foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean. To several regional actors, Russia seems a more secure, consistent ally than the retreating Americans and Europeans.

### ***Turkish Assertiveness***

Parallel to Russian encroachment we see greater Turkish assertiveness. Under the AKP, Turkey adopted a more ambitious foreign policy fueled by Islamic and neo-Ottoman impulses.<sup>40</sup> This raises the question of whether Turkey remains a status quo power. Under certain conditions Turkey may be tempted to capitalize on its conventional military superiority to force issues by military action in several

arenas, including the Aegean Sea, Cyprus, Syria, and/or Iraq. The potential disintegration of Syria and subsequent establishment of an independent Greater Kurdistan could become the incentives for Turkish interventionist policies. The collapse of the foreign policy dubbed “Zero problems” with its neighbors could push Ankara into open power-politics, tendencies which could be reinforced by Russia’s aggressive behavior in the Crimea.

Similarly, Turkey’s aspiration to become an energy bridge to Europe could lead to a complete conquest of Cyprus by Turkish troops stationed in the northern part of the island, divided since 1974.<sup>41</sup> Cyprus is the main station for a Turkish desired pipeline leading Levant Basin gas to Turkey before its export to Europe. Such a Turkish takeover would not only hurt Western geo-economic interests, but would constitute a significant Western loss of the strategically-situated island. Turkey under Erdoğan also encouraged Egypt, when ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, to abrogate the exclusive economic zone agreement between Egypt and Cyprus. Such a change in Egyptian policy would have hindered Cyprus’ efforts to produce the newly found oil and natural gas.

On more than one occasion, Prime Minister Erdoğan has tried to bully states in the region. In May 2010, he allowed the Mavi Marmara to challenge the Israeli naval quarantine of Gaza, prompting a commando raid at sea by Israel. Turkish warships harassed vessels prospecting for oil and gas off Cyprus.<sup>42</sup> Erdoğan has welcomed Sunni jihadists trying to oust Syria’s embattled President Bashar al-Assad, while also downing a Syrian jet in March 2014 (shortly before the municipal elections).

Turkey has embarked on several modernization programs of its armed forces and its branches have ambitious procurement plans. Moreover, Ankara has increasingly developed its own military industries. Turkey is among the 15 countries with the highest military spending in the world. Noteworthy, Turkey’s naval power is the largest in the East Mediterranean,<sup>43</sup> and is steadily building up its naval capabilities.<sup>44</sup> In March 2012, then-commander of the Turkish navy, Admiral Murat Bilgel outlined Turkey’s strategic objective “to operate not only in the littorals but also on the high seas,” with the latter referring to the Eastern Mediterranean. Bilgel identified the Turkish navy’s intermediate goals for the coming decade as “enhancing sea denial, forward

presence, and limited power projection capacity.” Indeed, Turkey refurbished its Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates, launched two Ada-class corvettes (and is building another three), commissioned six Kilic II-class missile boats, and is working on multiple missile systems. The strongest manifestation of its desire to project naval strength came in a December 2013 decision to purchase a large 27,500 ton landing dock vessel capable of holding multiple tanks, helicopters, and more than one thousand troops - perhaps an ominous indication of its intentions in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>45</sup>

The prospect for a destabilizing Turkish posture may materialize due to the absence of any balancing conventional power able or ready to curtail Turkish ambitions. Growing domestic political problems and a serious economic crisis might result in a diversionary war. The decreasing American influence in the region removes international constraints, while the growing Russian presence in the East Mediterranean could only heighten Turkey’s threat perception in light of past Turco-Russian rivalry and current Russian assertiveness. Israel could have deterring value only on issues of vital national security significance (Turkey refrained from sending additional ships to Gaza after the Mavi Marmara incident), but Jerusalem is reluctant to engage Turkish forces.

### ***The Cyprus-Greece-Israel Partnership***

As result of the new Turkish foreign policy and the souring of relations between Ankara and Jerusalem, we see the emergence of a Cypriot-Greek-Israeli axis. Turkey’s threats and actions have pushed Israel, Cyprus, and Greece closer together.<sup>46</sup> Beyond blocking a revisionist Turkey, and common interests in the area of energy security, the three states also share apprehensions about the East Mediterranean becoming an Islamic lake. Athens, Jerusalem and Nicosia hope to coordinate their lobbying efforts in Washington to sensitize the US to their concerns. Battling an economic crisis, Greece wants the new ties with Israel to boost tourism and investment, particularly in the gas industry, while deepening its military partnership with a powerful country in the region.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the emerging informal Israeli-Greek alliance has the potential to bring Israel closer to Europe and to moderate some of the pro-Palestinian bias occasionally displayed by the European Union. The détente between

Athens and Jerusalem also serves the Greek long standing interest in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which is the link between Orthodox Christianity and the Holy Land.<sup>48</sup>

The current efforts to restart the inter-communal talks in Cyprus might be used by Turkey to get greater leverage on Cyprus, but are unlikely to end in success, and subsequently change the foreign policy of the island. Similarly, the volatile domestic politics in Greece, particularly the rise of a fascist anti-Semitic political force, will probably not affect relations toward Israel.

Following Binyamin Netanyahu's visit to Greece (August 2010) (the first by an Israeli Prime Minister), cooperation between the two countries has been broad and multifaceted, covering the realms of culture, tourism (a 200 percent rise in Israelis visiting Greece) and economics (with several projects being discussed in fields such as agro-technology and energy). Among the areas of cooperation discussed was the possibility of creating a gas triangle – Israel-Cyprus-Greece – with Greece serving as the hub of Israeli and Cypriot gas exports to the rest of Europe.<sup>49</sup> Such a development could lessen the continent's energy dependence on Russia.<sup>50</sup> Another project that can further improve the ties between the countries is a proposed undersea electric power line between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. Currently Israel and Cyprus are isolated in terms of electricity and do not export or import almost any power. The plan, which will increase the countries' energy security is also aligned with the EU's plan of an interconnected energy market. An initial agreement to advance the power line was signed in March 2012.<sup>51</sup>

We have seen an intensification of relations at all levels, economic, political and even military. Israeli-Greek military cooperation has already manifested itself in a series of multinational (Greek, Israel and US), joint air and sea exercises under the names Noble Dina<sup>52</sup> and Blue Flag (including also an Italian contingent).<sup>53</sup> Greece also cooperated with Israel in July 2011 by preventing the departure of ships set to sail to Gaza. The Greek government issued a statement prohibiting the departure of ships with Greek and foreign flags from Greek ports to the maritime area of Gaza, explained as a bid to prevent a breach of Israel's naval

blockade.<sup>54</sup> Reflecting the burgeoning military ties between Athens and Jerusalem, Israel decided in March 2014 to open a new military attaché office in Greece.

### ***International Terrorism***

The developments in the East Mediterranean greatly enhanced the threat of international terrorism. The domestic problems plaguing weakened Arab states make them more terror prone. As leaders lose their grip over state territory and borders become more porous, armed groups and terrorists gain greater freedom of action. Moreover, the security services that dealt with terrorism are negatively affected by domestic politics and have lost some of their efficiency. Such problems plague post-Mubarak Egypt, where law and order have become more lax. For example, in the Sinai Peninsula on Israel's border, a pipeline supplying Israel (and Jordan) with Egyptian natural gas was repeatedly sabotaged. Sinai has also turned into an unimpeded route for Iranian weapons supply to Hamas and a base for terrorist attacks against Israel. Hamas has even set up rocket production lines in Sinai in an effort to protect its assets, as the group believes that Israel won't strike targets inside Egypt due to the affect it would have on bilateral relations.<sup>55</sup> Egypt under al-Sisi has intensified its efforts in cracking down the radical Islamist elements in Sinai, but this is a continuous struggle. Syria has also become a haven for many Islamic radical groups as result of the civil war there.

Furthermore, as weakened (failed) states lose control over their security apparatus, national arsenals of conventional (and non-conventional) arms become more vulnerable, which may result in the emergence of increasingly well-armed politically dissatisfied groups who seek to harm Israel. For example, following the fall of Gaddafi, Libyan SA-7 anti-air missiles and anti-tank RPGs have reached Hamas in Gaza.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in the event of the Syrian regime collapse, Syria's advanced arsenal, including chemical weapons, shore-to-ship missiles, air defense systems, and ballistic missiles of all types could end up in the hands of Hizballah or other radical elements.<sup>57</sup>

Terrorist activities could adversely affect the navigation through the Suez Canal, an important choke point. Salafi Jihadist groups have

attacked the canal several times already.<sup>58</sup> Maritime terrorism clearly remains appealing to non-state armed groups because of the potentially disastrous consequences it could have on world trade. The vessels moving slowly through the Suez Canal seem to constitute easy targets. The sinking of a vessel in the canal would effectively shut the entire maritime route for several days, if not weeks, while the wreckage is broken up and removed.<sup>59</sup>

The deterioration in the internal security of the littoral states has similar negative effects on the ability of state organs to deal with criminal activities such as drug and human trafficking, as well as piracy. Moreover, the decline of American influence removes constraints on the states ready to sponsor terrorist groups and activities.

### ***Iranian Presence in the East Mediterranean***

The decline in American power, the timidity of the Europeans and the turmoil in the Arab world facilitate Iranian encroachment of the Levant and the East Mediterranean. Indeed, Iran's attempts to boost its naval presence in the Mediterranean are part of an ambitious program to build a blue-water navy able to project power far away from Iran's borders.<sup>60</sup> Iranian warships docked at Syrian ports in 2011 and 2012. Iran's navy has shown its flag in international waters since 2010, deploying vessels in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden on missions to protect Iranian ships from Somali pirates.

Access to the Suez Canal enhances the ability of radical Iran to supply its Mediterranean allies: Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza. Moreover, it enhances Iran's access to Muslim Balkan states, namely Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo, increasing its influence in that part of the Mediterranean as well. Therefore, Iran has a clear stake in the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Assad's hold on power is critical for the existence of a Shi'ite Crescent from the Gulf to the Levant that allows Iranian influence in the Middle East and the East Mediterranean. Iran has also been strengthening naval cooperation with Russia, which it sees as a potential partner in its efforts to limit and constrain US influence.<sup>61</sup>

A growing Iranian ability to project power in the East Mediterranean is of great concern not only to Sunni regional actors such as Egypt and Turkey, but also to Israel and Greece. The emergence of a nuclear Iran, an issue largely beyond the scope of this article, will inevitably also affect the regional relations in the East Mediterranean.

### ***Wars over Gas Fields***

The discovery of gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean could potentially escalate tensions in this increasingly volatile region. Competing claims to the lucrative natural gas fields, made by Israel's former ally, Turkey, as well as by its neighbor Lebanon (still in a *de jure* state of war), have precipitated a build-up of naval forces in the Levant basin from a number of state actors wanting to get in on the action, including Russia. All this has occurred in the wake of the drawdown of American naval assets in the area, creating a power vacuum.

Meanwhile, Israel's wells, and the naval presence protecting them, offer new targets at sea to Israel's longstanding non-state enemies Hizballah and Hamas, whose modus operandi in the case of legal disputes is the use of force rather than through the court system.

Hizballah and Hamas could seek to disrupt Israel's off-shore venture by targeting Israeli rigs and naval patrols. Hizballah is already in possession of Chinese C-802 anti-ship missiles and is believed to have been given Russian Yakhont missiles by Syria. Iran could provide similar missiles to Hamas in Gaza. Hizballah's waning support in Lebanon, due to a blowback from its role in Syria, could push the organization to reclaim the popular role as the only resistance force capable of defending Lebanon from Israeli aggression. Fighting for Lebanese rights in the Eastern Mediterranean could provide the pretext needed for Hizballah to reestablish its credibility and *raison d'être* in the eyes of the Lebanese masses. Similarly, Hamas, vying with the Palestinian Authority for legitimacy in the Palestinian street, could buttress its claim to be the true resistance to Israel by attacking Israeli targets at sea. In August 2014, it announced two rocket attacks on an Israeli offshore gas installation. Other radical organizations in Gaza and in Sinai, some of them Iranian proxies, could do the same.

With a growing amount of increasingly sophisticated and lethal weaponry proliferating throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and plenty of radical motivations, a conflagration, triggered intentionally or by a tragic miscalculation, seems plausible. As noted, the Turkish energy appetite and growing assertiveness could also fuel military conflict.

Israeli defense circles hope that Israel's expanding navy, combined with its continuous improvement of land and air assets, and the increasing cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, will give pause to any regional actor that would consider turning the Mediterranean Sea into the next great field of battle. Indeed, the Israeli navy is preparing to defend the gas field offshore of Israel.<sup>62</sup> The IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz has approved the navy's plan to add, *inter alia*, four Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) to its order of battle.<sup>63</sup> Recently Israel has sought to increase the capabilities of its fast patrol vessels, the Shaldag and Super Dvora Mark III, of which another three larger variants are already on order from Israeli Aircraft Industries. In addition to these smaller purchases, Israel has been upgrading its Saar 4.5 missile boats and Saar 5 corvettes with new radars, electronic warfare systems, and anti-aircraft and anti-missile missiles. These surface assets are complemented by three submarines, which will be joined by two new Dolphin-class submarines, the most advanced in the Mediterranean, with a third in production. Finally, Israel hoped to procure four OPVs from Germany. However, as this purchase is unlikely to be pursued, an international bid for the OPVs is considered.<sup>64</sup>

The future role of Russia in these contingencies is not clear. Some analysts believe that Russia is interested in marketing the region's energy riches. Securing gas reserves in the East Mediterranean will also help Moscow safeguard its dominant position as a natural gas supplier to Western Europe, which could be challenged by new competitors in the region. Yet, delays and disruptions in transporting the gas to Europe might strengthen Russia's role even more as a major energy supplier to Europe and keep prices high, which is beneficial for Moscow. Moreover, as the Crimea crisis indicated, geopolitics still are a dominant factor in Russian decision-making.

## CONCLUSION

The longstanding security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was based on American preponderance, has collapsed. American political influence has been considerably weakened. Europe, an impotent international actor, cannot fill the political vacuum created. Russia under Putin eagerly entered this vacuum, beefing up its naval presence, while Western influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is also being challenged by the growing radical Islamic influence in the region. Turkey, no longer a trusted Western ally, has its own Mediterranean agenda and the military capability to project force to attain its goals. So far, the growing Russian assertiveness has not changed the course of Turkish foreign policy. The disruptive potential of failed states, the access of Iran to Mediterranean waters, and the competition between countries for energy resources are also destabilizing the region. But it is not clear that Western powers, particularly the US, are aware of the possibility of losing the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to Russia/and or radical Islam, or are preparing in any way to forestall such a scenario. Foolishly, they seem to believe that the so-called “Arab Spring” still heralds an improved political environment and that Turkey represents “moderate Islam.” American naiveté and European gullibility could become extremely costly in strategic terms.

In the absence of an American commitment to maintain a strong presence in the East Mediterranean, the US should encourage the strengthening relationship between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Moreover, it should sensitize its Mediterranean allies, such as France and Italy, to the growing threats in this region and press them to cooperate with Israel and Greece. Washington should also convey to Moscow and Ankara its positions and interests to minimize destabilizing acts. Unfortunately, the success of American diplomacy under the weak Obama administration is not guaranteed.

Threats to the freedom of shipping routes and the need to cooperate against terrorist threats could constitute an awakening call for Western powers. This could lead to greater willingness to commit military assets to neutralize emerging challenges. The economic crisis of the Eurozone, however, has so far led to cuts in defense outlays.

Egypt in the post Muslim Brotherhood rule is an important regional actor that shares many of the Israeli and Greek concerns. It can be incorporated in the building of a new security architecture that is based on regional powers. Every effort should be made by Western powers to prevent Egypt from moving closer to Russia.

For the time being, Cyprus, Greece and Israel, are largely left on their own. Thus, Greece should declare its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and reach an agreement with Cyprus on their mutual EEZs. By doing so, Greek-Cypriot-Israeli energy cooperation could be propelled forward. Obviously, Greece should not neglect its naval capabilities.

The Israeli perspective on the East Mediterranean region is colored by its vital need to maintain the freedom of maritime routes for its foreign trade, and to provide security for its newly found gas fields. While its strategic position has generally improved in the Middle East, Jerusalem sees deterioration in the environment in the East Mediterranean. Growing Russian presence and Turkish assertiveness is inimical to Israel's interest. Developments along the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean also decrease stability and enhance the likelihood of Islamist challenges.

This is particularly true at Israel's borders. Egypt struggles against radical Islamists in Sinai that threaten Israel's southern border. As result of the civil war in Syria, Israel's northern border is no longer quiet. So far Hizballah maintains the dominant position in Lebanon, while Hamas is entrenching its grip over Gaza. Both continue to be beneficiaries of Iranian military support, posing a considerable terrorist and missile threat to Israel.

This predicament clearly dictates greater investment in Israel's navy to fend off potential challenges. The need to be able to project force to great distances has remained constant (also because of the Iranian nuclear challenge). Moreover, cooperation with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt has to be strengthened in order to minimize challenges to stability in the Mediterranean waters. As greater terrorist and missile threats develop along Israel's borders, it becomes necessary to enhance the magnitude and quality of the defensive forces on the borders. Moreover, Israel needs larger expenditures for a build-up of the various layers of its anti-missile

defenses primarily to protect its strategic assets, such as airfields, ports, power plants and deployment areas of the IDF.

In civilizational terms, the East Mediterranean served as a bone of contention in the past between Persia and the ancient Greeks and between the Ottomans and Venetians. It is the focal point for the struggle between East and West. After the Cold War, the borders of the West shifted eastward. Now, they could move in the other direction.

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