



PERSPECTIVES

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Kastellorizo: Tiny Island, Colossal Dispute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Sitting just 2 km away from the Turkish coast and containing a population of only 500, the island of Kastellorizo, the tiniest of the Greek Dodecanese islands, is the focal point of a multinational maritime dispute. No one seems to have found a way to resolve the quarrel between Turkey and the EU + US + Israel + Egypt over this island.

Though the official name of the Greek island of Kastellorizo, Megisti, means “biggest”, its area is a minuscule 11.98 square kilometers and its population barely 500 people. It is the smallest of Greece’s Dodecanese islands. This otherwise largely forgotten scrap of land has gained new fame, however—not because of a revival of the award-winning movie that was filmed there (*Mediterraneo*, 1991) but because it is at the center of a multinational maritime dispute.

Greece’s northern Aegean islands are suffering the extreme burden of a constant flow of illegal migrants who now populate islands like Lesbos in the same numbers as do the locals. Kastellorizo is one of the lucky few islands neighboring Turkey to have remained isolated from a refugee catastrophe. In the Aegean, the Greeks want their islands and their lives back. Unfortunately, their frustration does not come at a time of diplomatic rapprochement between the two historical rivals.

In January, the Greek military claimed that a pair of Turkish F-16 fighter jets had flown over the southeastern Aegean island of Lipsoi without authorization. But overflights are not the only hot issue in the Aegean and, now, the Mediterranean. Turkey accuses Greece of keeping troops on the islands in violation of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which governs the Aegean Sea. Athens is pushing back against Turkish demands to demilitarize the 16 islands.

Nor is that all. Turkish-Greek tensions escalated even further in December when Ankara signed a controversial maritime border accord with one of the

warring factions in Libya (the Government of National Accord) in the hope that the move would block an Israeli-Egyptian-Cypriot-Greek ambition to transport East Mediterranean natural gas into Europe. In January, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan further ratcheted up tensions by announcing that Turkish research ships would be deployed in contested Cypriot waters to search for hydrocarbons.

In December, Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis said: “Turkey's attempt to abolish the maritime borders of islands like Crete, Rhodes, Karpathos, and Kastellorizo with tricks, such as voiding bilateral memorandums of understanding, will not produce internationally legal results.” Of the islands he mentioned, perhaps the tiniest is the most critical in the now multinational EastMed games: Kastellorizo, which lies just 2 km away from the Turkish coast. One need not be much of a swimmer to easily swim from Kastellorizo to Turkey.

Kastellorizo was granted to Italy in the Treaty of Lausanne and in 1947 was given to Greece by the Italians in the Treaty of Paris. The dispute over this tiniest of the Aegean islands concerns whether or not Kastellorizo is entitled to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and a continental shelf.

In July, Turkey issued a navigational telex reserving a large area south of Kastellorizo, within Greece's continental shelf, for military exercises. The Turkish Navtex reserved an area stretching from the south of Kastellorizo westward towards Rhodes for exercises using live ammunition. This was a subtle announcement that more tensions were in the offing.

According to Greece's EEZ, the maritime line stretching through Crete-Rhodes-Kastellorizo is the basis for the demarcation of its territorial waters. With that and a possible delimitation of the Greek EEZ with Egypt and Cyprus, the continental shelf and the Turkish EEZ are automatically confined only to an open point in the Mediterranean in the Gulf of Antalya, making Kastellorizo a focal point that defines the Greek EEZ.

Ankara argues that the line from Rhodes to Kastellorizo closes off the Turkish coastline and the line between Kastellorizo and Egypt (with the Greek and Cypriot EEZs now matched) would limit the Turkish maritime zone. Turkey also says Kastellorizo's close proximity prevents Ankara from exercising its rights in its own maritime zone.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said: “Greece has illegally militarized 16 of the 23 islands (under the Treaty of Lausanne) since 1936. On the other hand it claims a continental shelf of six miles while claiming it has an airspace of 10 miles—never before seen in history. This does not make sense.”

Ignoring Turkish threats by conducting its own drilling activity off Cyprus and keeping a naval presence in contested waters, Cypriot president Nikos Anastasiades said Cyprus would not put its exploratory gas drilling plans on hold. "Pausing drilling in the face of Turkish pressure would be tantamount to Cyprus abrogating its sovereign rights," he said.

A helping hand was extended to Cyprus and its present and potential future partners by Washington at a time when Turkish-American diplomacy is at a low ebb. US lawmakers managed to pass major legislation that could potentially remake the geopolitics of the Middle East and Europe: they tucked an obscure provision into an omnibus spending package that lifted arms restrictions and boosted the controversial pipeline deal in the Eastern Mediterranean. The legislative text promises a range of US assistance for the development of natural gas resources off the coasts of Israel and Cyprus, including support for construction of pipelines and liquified natural gas terminals and the creation of a US-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Center in the region run by the US Department of Energy.

Turkey feels it is a prisoner of geography. But what to do? According to Dominick Chilcott, Britain's ambassador to Ankara, maritime disputes in the Mediterranean should be handled by international arbitration if they cannot be resolved through negotiations.

But according to Ioannis Corantis, a former Greek ambassador to Ankara, the rising tensions are being fueled by a continuous flurry of hostile statements from Ankara at all levels. Greece is responding in a "*si vis pacem, para bellum*" frame of mind. Corantis said:

Turkish officials should realize that a "crisis point" as a preamble to a smaller or larger "armed event" would entail for Ankara far heavier costs than the benefits they look for. In turn NATO, and the US in particular, should carefully consider the detrimental consequences of such a "crisis point" for security and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and further on. East-Med is of great importance to the EU as it will provide more than 10% of the natural gas Europe needs. It is one of the EU's Projects of Common Interest and is thus co-financed by the bloc. It is also strongly supported by the US as a counterbalance to Russian energy exports to Europe. Unhindered access to, and supply from, hydrocarbon sources is of critical importance to the EU which is not inclined to allow third parties to dictate their will on European consumers. Continued threatening noises and bullying from Ankara do not augur well.

One problem is that Turkey is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The convention grants a continental shelf and EEZ to islands concerning territorial waters.

“Kastellorizo’s geographical proximity to Turkey has no bearing on the status given it by international treaties,” Corantis argues. “Otherwise, if we follow the Turkish line of thinking, Venezuela or the Dominican Republic may claim that Martinique and Guadeloupe are closer to them than to France—to which they belong—several thousands of miles away, and therefore should have limited rights on their maritime zones.”

On Feb. 6, Erdoğan’s spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, said Turkey will proceed in the near future with drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, south and east of the islands of Crete, Rhodes, and Karpathos. “That is to say in the area defined by the illegal MoU between Turkey and the Tripoli Government—which has been declared null and void, as contrary to international law, by the EU, the US and all countries of the region. [This] paves the way for further tension in the area,” Corantis warns.

With his neo-Ottoman naval ambitions, Erdoğan is sailing into uncharted territory with Turkey and the Tripoli government facing down the EU, the US, Israel, and Cyprus—not to mention Jordan and Lebanon. This does not look like a winnable war for Turkey’s Islamist strongman.

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