



# PERSPECTIVES

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## The Dangerous Waters of the Mediterranean

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The national agendas of Greece and Turkey continue to clash in the Mediterranean. Even if Turkey discontinues its explorations south of the Greek island of Kastelorizo in the medium term, it will be difficult for the two to conduct a productive bilateral dialogue. The European idea of a multilateral summit of all Eastern Mediterranean countries is more promising, but not yet concrete. Israel supports the right of Greece to delimit its continental shelf and favors regional cooperation as a member of the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), but understands that as matters stand, the possibility of a breakthrough is limited.

In a recent *Bloomberg* piece, James Stavridis argued that the “[most dangerous waters in the world are in the Mediterranean](#).” While this claim is debatable (tensions in the South China Sea seem more ominous), few would disagree that dangers do exist in the Mediterranean.

The current standoff between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean is telling. Since the beginning of August, the Turkish research vessel Oruc Reis has been conducting exploration in waters claimed by both Athens and Ankara. As there is no agreement between the two, the US is employing its typical equal distances approach and characterizes these waters as “[disputed](#).” The Orus Reis returned to Antalya Port on September 13, but it is unclear how long it will remain there.

Israel, for its part, is standing with Greece. On August 12, [it expressed its full support and solidarity with Greece](#) in its maritime zones and its right to delimit its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Unlike Israel and Cyprus, however, Greece only recently took concrete steps in that regard. Following the November 2019 agreement on maritime zones between Turkey and Libya,

Greece embarked on an attempt to protect its sovereign rights, however belatedly.

For many years, Greek governments postponed difficult decisions, despite Turkey's continued rise in the neighborhood. Wishful thinking and inertia turned serious problems into potentially grave ones. Obviously, the economic crisis, a product of maladministration at the domestic level, could not but have an effect on foreign and defense policies.

The conservative Greek government that came to power in July 2019 signed two maritime deals in response to Turkish actions : the first with Italy in June 2020 and the second (and more important) with Egypt in August. The zones of the Greek-Egyptian agreement intersect with those of the Turkish-Libyan one. At this writing, the explorations of the Oruc Reis have not violated areas marked in the Greek-Egyptian accord—but its explorations south of Kastelorizo challenge the traditional Greek position shaped by international law that stipulates that islands have a right to an EEZ and a continental shelf. Turkey disagrees, and is advocating for a delimitation based on equity. In so doing, it is provoking Greece in order to predispose the international community to accept its argument.

Delimitation spats in the Eastern Mediterranean are not unusual. Israel and Lebanon, for instance, have an unresolved maritime border dispute. Also, the Greek-Egyptian maritime agreement is partial and does not cover all the islands (such as Rhodes) because Cairo decided to navigate between the position of Athens and Ankara. When Ankara announced it would "[not allow any activity in the area in question](#)," the Egyptian Foreign Ministry [tweeted its surprise](#) that such statements and allegations were being issued by a party that did not know the details of the agreement.

The description of the problem is much easier than its solution. A dialogue between Greece and Turkey has been suggested by mediators such as the US and EU as well as permanent members of the UN Security Council China and Russia. However, Greece is prepared to discuss only the matter of maritime zones, while Ankara's agenda encompasses issues that Athens cannot accept such as the demilitarization of several Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. For Greece, [everything that is threatened is not demilitarized](#). The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 dramatically outlines the threat.

The situation appears to be at an impasse. The EU depends on Turkey on several issues, such as management of the refugee crisis, and has repeatedly delayed long overdue sanctions. Even if some sanctions are eventually put into effect, their impact will be limited. The Oruc Reis has conducted its research without interruption in the Eastern Mediterranean without regard

for the mild statements issued by Europe. Also, President Donald Trump, who has scored foreign policy successes in the Middle East and the Balkans, did not initially manage to reduce tensions [after his telephone conversations with PM Mitsotakis and President Erdoğan](#). Russia, which has very good relations with Turkey, might be willing to help diffuse tensions, [if asked](#).

On the public diplomacy level, [Turkey threatens Greece](#) almost daily, which ratchets up the risk of a military incident. (In mid-August, the Greek frigate Limnos accidentally collided with the Turkish ship Kemal Reis, [damaging the right side of the latter's stern](#).)

In an optimal scenario, the activities of the Oruc Reis will be frozen in the medium term [in response to diplomatic pressure from the US](#) and [Germany](#), though what will ultimately follow remains obscure. NATO has been largely absent from the tensions in the Mediterranean, rather vindicating French President Emmanuel Macron's "brain dead" comment. NATO is conducting [technical talks for de-confliction](#) but is not giving further details.

One option that seems viable but needs further elaboration is a multilateral dialogue with the participation of the Eastern Mediterranean countries and external brokers. President of the EU Council Charles Michel [has spoken in favor of a multilateral conference](#). The existence of the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), an initiative that includes Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority, highlights the significance of regional collaboration among partners for energy issues in the Basin. However, the agenda of Michel's proposed conference needs to be specified.

This also applies to countries that might attend. Israel, for example, has already started to export natural gas from its own reservoirs and does not enthusiastically welcome EU involvement in Middle East affairs (this is particularly true after the achievement of the Abraham Accords). Furthermore, the representation of Lebanon, Libya, and Syria as well as Cyprus in a way that would satisfy both Anastasiades and Erdoğan might scupper the idea.

History does not suggest reason for optimism. The waters of the Mediterranean remain a source of disagreement and, occasionally, danger.

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