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Webinar Report

«The Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: Scenarios and Implications»

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Turkish-Greek maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean have morphed into a conventional geopolitical confrontation between Turkey and a set of countries, including Greece, France, the UAE, and Egypt. As the files and actors of this crisis have expanded, the solution has become even more intractable. Taking the complexity and multidimensionality of the topic along with the diversity of the actors involved in the Eastern Mediterranean into consideration, Al Sharq Strategic Research hosted, on November 25, 2020, a webinar on the subject with a view geared towards projecting potential scenarios and implications of the crisis on the actors involved and beyond. The webinar was a closed-session discussion with Chatham House rules. The following report is a product of the notes taken by Al Sharq members and points raised by speakers combined under relevant topics. In this sense, the reports should be considered takeaway points from the discussions rather than a full account of the participants' statements.

In line with its multifaceted nature, the speakers approached the issue from different angles. The discussions revolved around:

- the dynamics behind the conflict, both historical and current,
- the role of the EU, particularly that of France and Germany,
- the potential role of the new Biden administration,
- the arms race between Turkey and Greece,
- the now fashionable Blue Homeland concept and what it entails,
- the danger of a military incident between Greece and Turkey,
- the question of exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece and the prospect of a reconciliation,
- and possible scenarios for the Cyprus conflict.

Dynamics behind the conflict

Speakers of the webinar emphasized the multidimensional nature of the conflict that has historical roots but has also been triggered and aggravated by contemporary geopolitical and energy developments. The attendees drew attention to the fact that despite the current context of escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean region, underlying factors were resulting from the historical disputes and contending narratives of sovereignty, roots going as far back as the foundation of both states. Here, historical memories and narratives aggravate the bilateral issues in Greek-Turkish relations.

The current confrontation started over Turkey's energy explorations in contested waters, which Cyprus claims to belong to its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). A second issue, one speaker argued, concerns the Libyan crisis, which intensified the geopolitical competition between Turkey on one side and France, Egypt, and UAE on the other. This concern is more specifically related to the maritime delimitation agreement that Ankara signed with the Tripoli-based UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). This deal has further strained Turkish-Greek relations as it directly conflicts with Greece's view of its maritime borders and denies Greek islands, such as Crete, any EEZ. For instance, the recent defense agreement between the UAE and Greece was an outcome of the Libyan conflict and a reaction to Turkey's role in this conflict. From Turkey's point of view, the Greek-Cypriot view of Turkey's maritime boundaries and of the rights of the Turkish Cypriots are unfair and reductionist. Ankara views the Republic of Cyprus as an extension of Greece rather than a separate actor. Furthermore, all the crises in Cyprus-Turkish relations invariably affect Turkish-Greek bilateral relations.

On top of these bilateral and contemporary issues, speakers pointed to changes in the international order that facilitated the current escalation and regional geopolitical confrontation. The perceived decline of the international community and multilateral diplomacy have caused actors involved in the conflict to believe that unilateral actions are more effective in achieving their goals. Speakers also commented on the inseparable nature of Turkey and Greece's conflict from the developments in the regional geopolitics. Israel, the UAE, and Egypt signed deals with Greece to counter Turkey. One participant pointed out that while Turkey wants Greece to give up on its EEZ around Kastellorizo, a small island so close to the southern Turkish coast, it ignored Crete's EEZ in its deal with Libya's GNA. In reaction to the Turkish-Libyan deal, Greece signed similar maritime demarcations agreements with Italy and Egypt. Therefore, the Libyan conflict spilled over into the Eastern Mediterranean, where the UAE, Egypt, and France threw their support behind Haftar in Libya and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean. Participants also argued that domestic politics in those countries added another layer of complication to the crisis.

Despite the complications that the gas discovery has caused in this crisis, many participants agreed that the gas is not the primary driver as they believe that the size of the gas reserves and its potential monetization have been exaggerated. Additionally, the plummeting oil and gas prices, which are expected to remain so in the immediate future, reduces the prospect of profitability for the region's reserves.

The role of the EU and its members

Both Greece and the Republic of Cyprus are EU members. While Turkey is an official candidate for the EU membership, the accession negotiation has come to a standstill long ago. Given this picture, what is the role of the EU and its member states, particularly France and Germany, within this conflict?

Though there is unanimity in the EU in opposing Turkey's policy, there is disagreement on how to respond to this policy. Turkey and the EU's ongoing problems have spilled over into the current conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean. At this stage, instead of dealing with the EU as a candidate country, Turkey wants to deal with the EU on equal footing. In response, the EU is increasingly viewing Turkey as a challenge, if not a threat, rather than a partner. One of the most dramatic demonstration of this view was recently echoed by the US Secretary of State Pompeo when he told the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, that he and Macron agreed that Turkey was the aggressor in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and South Caucasus. In the same vein, in a joint press conference in Paris, the French foreign minister, with his German counterpart Heiko Maas referred to Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as provocative and unacceptable.

In contrast, the EU and even Germany have lost their credibility as a reliable mediator between Turkey and Greece in the Turkish government and the public eye. They perceive the EU on the other side of the confrontation. The recent boarding of a Turkish vessel by German marine forces within Operation IRINI was used as an example of the EU's hostility towards Turkey. Furthermore, Chinese drones bought by the UAE and shipped to Libya unimpeded to support Haftar's forces exemplify that the EU has only tried to block the maritime route for the arms transfer to Libya. In reality, this means that the EU is only focusing on Turkey, undermining the EU's claim to impartiality.

The role of the US and incoming Biden administration

While the decline of multilateralism with the Trump administration paved the way for unilateral actions in regional conflicts, the speakers deemed it worth discussing future scenarios under Biden's presidency since the Biden administration has promised to undo Trump's isolationist policies. According to some speakers, Trump's lack of interest in the Eastern Mediterranean affairs, except for facilitating the recent rapprochement between Israel and Gulf monarchies, emboldened Turkey to take a bolder stance in the dispute. Lacking US leadership, other actors tried to balance Turkey by signing bilateral agreements and forming alliances. They agreed that the Biden administration might take a more proactive role and ally the US more with the European actors on the conflict. However, the lack of trust in America's impartiality as a mediator in the eyes of Turkish publics will make the job extremely difficult. Plus, if the anticipated deterioration in Turkish-US relations under the Biden administration materializes, then the US role in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis will be further complicated.

The arms race between Turkey and Greece

The escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean led to an arms race between Turkey and Greece. Despite the economic distress, Athens has significantly boosted its defense spending. One speaker argued that the Turkish navy is more advanced compared to the Greek navy. The Turkish navy has 16 frigates (the largest in the Mediterranean), four indigenous corvettes, and 12 submarines. Additionally, Turkey has some new expected assets, like Reis-class submarines that are similar to tomahawks of the US navy or caliber missiles of the Russian navy. It will equip Turkey with the ability to launch long-range high-precision land attacks.

The second part is the correlation between Turkey's Syria and Iraq expeditions and naval performance. Turkey has marine units, and naval commandos have gained significant combat experience. With the forthcoming TCG Anadolu, Turkey's own aircraft carrier, these units will play a huge role in Turkey's naval identity. Turkey will be transformed from a coastal deterrence into a blue-water power project in the navy. This is not military modernization but geopolitical change under the concept of the Blue Homeland. Turkey is transforming its military mindset and strategic calculus as modernization of its navy and geopolitical calculus.

Another trend is the “dronization” of the navy. Turkish drones came under spots in Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan. The Turkish navy is being rapidly “dronized”. Since the Greek army has to balance drones with F-16s, responding to unmanned crafts with manned crafts will be too costly for Athens because unmanned platforms are cheaper and do not lead to casualties.

Greece is also modernizing its army. While Turkey was excluded from the F-35 program, Greece owns F-35s; this is a major advantage that Greece has over Turkey. Additionally, Athens bought Dassault Rafale model warplanes from France while Turkey lost 9 billion USD from the F-35 program and is paying a very high price for S-400s. In short, while Turkey has an edge in terms of unmanned platforms, Greece is in a better position regarding manned platforms.

One speaker warned that a Turkish-Greek military confrontation would be devastating for both sides. First, naval and aerial warfare between two NATO members, even if the military confrontation does not involve other actors, would be catastrophic in all aspects. Economically, it will destroy both economies as naval warfare is extraordinarily costly and is not sustainable. In terms of casualties, the numbers will be unbearable for both sides. Such a military incident will be a multi-front confrontation, with no clear winner.

Prospects of reconciliation

With the dangers of escalation and a military incident between Turkey and Greece in mind, participants also discussed the prospects of a settlement and de-escalation. One speaker pointed to lack of trust between two nations at both elite and public levels as obstacles awaiting any resolution or even de-escalation. Neither side trusts the other’s intentions due to historical grievances and conflicting narratives. Moreover, Turks and Greeks do not trust the US as an impartial and reliable mediator. The EU also lost its credibility in the eyes of the Turkish elites and the public. There had been exploratory talks between Ankara and Athens up until 2016. A Turkey-EU accession process proved impetus for these previous exploratory talks. However, with the halt in Turkey’s accession process, the prospect of any resolution in Turkish-Greek bilateral disputes have further faded away from the horizon. Despite these challenges, talks are likely to resume, particularly if a moratorium on energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean is announced. The aim of exploratory talks at this stage is not about finding solutions; rather, it is about defining parameters within which the dispute might be addressed.

One speaker argued that Greece's current government, from the Prime Minister to foreign policy officials, is a moderate one that often expresses its openness to negotiations. However, the Greek side insists that Turkey withdraw its warships and exploration vessels from the region first. The Greek side also insists on taking the conflict to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. The court will require both sides to compromise, and the leader will have a better case to convince their public to accept the deal. In contrast, the Turkish side insists on a negotiating route to address the crisis.

Moreover, each side is aware of the lack of economic sustainability in the case of escalation and armament. With the financial losses borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parties may recognize that it is not in their interest to continue the current confrontation. However, a solution is not possible without resolving the Cyprus issue. Given the fact we are far away from any resolution for the question concerning Cyprus, we are unlikely to talk of any resolution on the Turkish-Greek bilateral track anytime soon. The unresolved nature of the Cyprus crisis poisons the whole of Turkish-Greek relations.

Scenarios for the crisis in Cyprus

One participant pointed out that there are three options in Cyprus: 1) a one-state solution, a bi-communal and bi-zonal federal model, 2) a two-state solution, and 3) the annexation of Northern Cyprus by Turkey. A unified state in Cyprus means that the Turkish Cypriots will become EU citizens. With the Turkish influence among them, Turkey will have another source of influence within the EU. However, in this option, the Greek Cypriot leaders will need to decide how they will handle their Turkish citizens. The second option will be the recognition of the current situation. However, Northern Cyprus is so heavily dependent on Turkey that it may not be a viable independent nation. Finally, annexing the North is not a desirable solution for Turkey. Turkey will lose its leverage against the EU. Given the results of the recent election in the North, it is not clear whether the majority of Turkish Cypriots will even prefer this option. Negotiations should address all these and many other issues as well as the will of the Turkish Cypriots.

The concept of the Blue Homeland

The Blue Homeland (or *Mavi Vatan* in Turkish) is another hot topic in the discussions on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to one speaker, it is not a military doctrine as there is no guiding manual for the Turkish navy on how to operate. It is not even a foreign policy as the ministry of foreign affairs does not have a role or agency in this concept. Instead, it is a geopolitical concept pioneered by the navy. The navy wants to lead the Turkish policy in the Mediterranean, and the techno-nationalist military industry supports the idea. It results from the threat perception that Turkey is being caged to Anatolia. Hence, it is an attempt to defend Turkey's access to and rights in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

In short, the webinar participants, who are prominent observers of the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, discussed various dimensions on the issue of the current crisis. They discussed the historical and the current factors behind the confrontation. They denoted the historical roots of the contemporary disputes. They claimed that the energy dimension was not that significant, with the benefits of extraction not meeting the costs. They emphasized that the conflict cannot be separated from changes in the international order, regional geopolitics, and actors' domestic politics. They argued that the EU does not act as a mediator but as a party to the confrontation. As for the US, they expect a comeback with the Biden administration but warned of the challenges the US might face in its attempt to resolve the dispute. The arms race between Turkey and Greece was another discussion topic and viewed as a contributing factor in the escalation.

Moreover, they argued that neither the current situation nor an armed confrontation between Turkey and Greece is sustainable. While they perceived some modest prospects for a reconciliation, they were far from being hopeful due to many challenges preventing a lasting resolution. As for the matter of Cyprus, it seems that a one-state solution would be more preferable than the other options. However, a one-state solution would face many challenges that need to be addressed as well.

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With the participation of 30 experts and scholars on the Middle East politics.

This report was prepared by Mustafa Kaymaz based on the notes taken during the webinar by Al Sharq Strategic Research interns, Selman Büyükkara and Furkan Ömür.



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