



The East Mediterranean Triangle at Crossroads

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The alliance system in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has significantly evolved over the last years. The rift between Israel and Turkey since 2009 led to new strategic developments. In particular, Israeli-Greek ties have grown in earnest. Authorities in Israel and Greece have signed various trade as well as security cooperation agreements. Furthermore, the discovery of natural gas reserves in the southeastern Mediterranean has prompted cooperation between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

This Israel-Greece-Cyprus initiative has logically triggered strong opposition from Turkey, which does not recognize the government in Nicosia and objects to the claims of the Greek Cypriot Administration over the gas reserves in the south of the island. Ankara responded by conducting air and sea military drills close to the area of the planned project, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu threatened that Turkey would take appropriate measures if the three countries were to go on with the project.

As a result, the East Mediterranean Triangle can now be characterized as a volatile regional system in which alliances are no longer stable blocs. This is reflected in the ambivalent games played by the three main actors. Each of them is trying to seek seemingly contradictory goals: Israel wants to restore its ties with Turkey while hedging against Ankara's policies via a rapprochement with Greece; Greece aims to strengthen its military and commercial relations with Israel, but without openly defying Turkey; Turkey still benefits from Israeli military know-how but expresses strong condemnations of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, and moreover, it dismisses the Israeli-Greek rapprochement while it uses its Navy in the Mediterranean area as a means of coercive diplomacy against competing forces. All of this generates an odd zero-sum game: every stakeholder claims the rules of this game still apply but bypasses them.

Moreover, the competition affects the security arrangements in Europe, with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Middle East partnership being in a deadlock. The natural gas projects brought about disputes over the territorial claims in the area and in the coming years, without a diplomatic settlement, it could lead to rising naval skirmishes with gunboat diplomacy becoming a norm.

To prevent instability, the United States has to navigate between the concerns and the sensitivity of three allies. The core issue of the current troubles in the East Mediterranean Triangle remains the crisis in the Turkish-Israeli relations. As a result, the first measure to prevent further escalation in this rift is to disconnect the Turkish-Israeli file from the Greek and Cypriot cases. U.S. diplomats and officers should carefully dismiss the counterbalancing narrative behind the Israeli-Greek rapprochement. Following the same logic of prevention, the U.S. administration may address the NATO issue by making the case that the Alliance's partnership policy should not be undermined by the tensions between one member nation and a partner country. It does not mean challenging or ignoring the Turkish political agenda; otherwise, this would only bring further obstruction from Ankara. However, the scope of NATO-Israel partnership is by nature modest and should not be the issue of a fierce diplomatic fight. A second step would look at the ways to reinstate political and diplomatic dialogue between Israel and Turkey. The United States could act as a mediator by convening working-level meetings to discuss common areas of interest, such as the Syrian crisis and its effects on the region. Eventually, this could pave the way for a return to stability in the East Mediterranean area.

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