

# THE IMPACT OF TÜRKİYE AND ISRAEL'S RAPPROCHEMENT ON THE MARITIME DELIMITATION DISPUTE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

*Türkiye and Israel relations have recently improved with ambassadors' mutual appointment to the respective countries. This recent rapprochement between the two essential states of the Middle East also influences the ongoing political disputes in the seas of this region. As is well known, Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus (North and South) have been in conflict regarding the delimitation of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this conflict, Greece and Southern Cyprus have developed strong alliances with western countries, the most important ones being the U.S. and the EU. The recent rapprochement between Türkiye and Israel may change the game in the region and improve Türkiye's hand with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean dispute.*

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***Brief History of Türkiye-Israel Relations:***

Türkiye recognized the state of Israel, which was declared on 14 May 1948 on 28 March 1949. This decision made Türkiye one of the first countries to recognize Israel. The Turkish embassy was opened in Tel Aviv on 7 January 1950. In the following years, the ups and downs in relations between Türkiye and Israel have been mostly a result of Israel's policies about Palestine and the greater Middle East. That said, both countries have tried to sustain good relations with each other as two important states of the highly volatile region.

The Baghdad Pact established in 1955 between Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, negatively influenced Türkiye-Israel relations. After Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, Türkiye protested against Israel's landing of troops on Egyptian soil on 29 October 1956. The relations between the two countries were reduced to the level of *chargé d'affaires* on 26 November 1956. Afterward, seven years passed for the situation to return to its former state, and during the early 1960s, the two countries had good relations again.

However, with the Six-Day War, which started with Israel's sudden attack on Egypt in 1967 and continued with its occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights in Syria, Ankara took a stance on the side of the Arab countries. Türkiye wanted Israel to withdraw from the occupied areas, including the Golan and Jerusalem. As a result, bilateral relations remained tense in the following years and during most of the 1970s.

After a challenging decade in bilateral relations, the representatives of the two countries were again elevated to the embassy level as of 1 January 1980. But after Israel annexed East Jerusalem and declared Jerusalem the eternal capital on 30 July 1980, Türkiye closed the Jerusalem Consulate and reduced the level of representation in Tel Aviv to the lowest level.

During the Özal years in Türkiye, bilateral relations improved again. Türkiye's vote against the 1989 resolution banning the representation of Israel in the UN started the softening process in relations. Also, with the Middle East peace process that began with the Madrid Conference, the tension in Arab-Israeli relations tended to decrease. In 1991, both Palestine and Israel raised their representations in Ankara to the level of embassies. This step was followed by the start of Türkiye's consulate general activities in Jerusalem.

However, the relations between Türkiye and Israel, which developed under the

influence of the atmosphere brought by the Middle East peace process in the 1990s, deteriorated due to the anti-peace radicalism of then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Sharon's very harsh policy towards the Palestinians worsened relations with Türkiye. In the early 2000s, steps were again taken to improve relations. Then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, representatives of the newly elected Justice and Development Party, started to visit Israel and Palestine regularly.

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During the early 2000s, the two countries had very good relations. But Israel's attack on Lebanon on 12 July 2006 and the Gaza Strip on 27 December 2008 received a great reaction from Türkiye. At a session at the World Economic Forum held in Davos at the beginning of 2009, then Prime Minister Erdogan reacted to former Israeli President Shimon Peres' words legitimizing the Gaza attacks. This famous so-called “One-minute” debate was the beginning of the deterioration of bilateral relations in the following decade.

To make matters worse, the Mavi Marmara incident, which took place on 1 May 2010, has become one of the most significant breaking points in Türkiye-Israel relations. Israel intervened in international waters to the convoy carrying humanitarian aid to break the blockade on Gaza. 9 Turkish citizens were killed on board, and one seriously injured citizen died later. While withdrawing its Ambassador from Tel Aviv after the incident, Türkiye demanded that Israel immediately apologize, pay compensation to the victims' families, and lift the blockade on Gaza. Followingly, Israel did not take any steps, and Türkiye reduced the relations to the minimum level. Türkiye also reduced diplomatic representation to the chargé d'affaires level and suspended all military agreements.

Later, former U.S. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the ‘capital of Israel’ on 6 December 2017, and the official relocation of her country's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on 14 May 2018, caused outrage in the Middle East and particularly in Türkiye.

After a decade of tension in bilateral relations, the dialogue that developed between President Erdogan and the new Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who took office on 7 July 2021, finally enabled the steps to be taken for re-normalization between Türkiye and Israel. During the visit of Israeli President Herzog to Türkiye on 9-10 March 2022, bilateral relations were reviewed in all their dimensions. Israeli President Isaac Herzog became the first Israeli leader to visit Türkiye since 2008.

After this visit, Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who was also his country's foreign minister at that time, revisited Türkiye. During this visit from Israel to Türkiye, which was held at the level of foreign minister for the first time in 16 years, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Lapid announced that they had started the work to increase the level of diplomatic representation to the ambassador level. Another important step in cooperation in bilateral relations has been the newly signed bilateral aviation agreement between the two countries, which enabled Israeli airline companies to resume their flights to Türkiye.

More recently, the Appointment Committee of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has decided to appoint Irit Lillian, Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy in Ankara, as Ambassador of Israel in Türkiye. Correspondingly, the Turkish government appointed Ambassador Şakir Özkan Torunlar, who served as the Consulate General of Jerusalem in 2010-2014 and the Embassy in New Delhi between January 2017-May 2021, to the Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Today, Türkiye-Israel relations have improved significantly, and both countries regularly state that they need each other in this challenging geography. Mainly, Türkiye-Israel rapprochement is crucial for Türkiye as it has difficult times with its neighboring Greece and Southern Cyprus in the seas of the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, the improvement of relations between the two countries is to the benefit of Israel, as its loneliness in the middle east continues, and it desperately needs powerful allies such as Türkiye.

### ***The Eastern Mediterranean Dispute and Türkiye-Israel Relations:***

Following the exploration of hydrocarbon reserves since the early 2000s, the conflicting claims of the littoral state on the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean region have resulted in a jurisdictional crisis. The Eastern Mediterranean is an important region due to energy resources, not only in terms of the law of the sea for sharing but also because it is located in a strategic position that enables the transportation of hydrocarbon resources from the Middle East to Europe.<sup>1</sup> The changing global and regional conjuncture after the Cold War has

<sup>1</sup> Ş. V. Ediger, B. Devlen, and B. D. McDonald, "Levant'ta Büyük Oyun: Doğu Akdeniz'in Enerji Jeopolitiği," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 9, No. 33, 2012.

increased the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean as a new strategic interaction region. Among these interactions, the most prominent one today is the claims of the littoral parties of the Eastern Mediterranean over the maritime jurisdiction areas in the basin.<sup>2</sup>

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In particular, the claims of Greece, Türkiye, Southern Cyprus, and Northern Cyprus have been on the agenda since the early 2000s and have quickly become one of the main issues in the region in the last decade. The reflections of this conflict directly affect other states such as Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and the UK. It also concerns global actors’ economic and political interests, such as the USA, Russia, and the EU. What makes this dispute regarding maritime jurisdiction areas in the region so critical is the potential oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> The 2,5 billion barrels of oil deposits and the 7 trillion cubic meters of natural gas explored in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of numerous littoral states in the region, especially in Cyprus (Aphrodite, 2011), in Israel (Tamar, 2009; Leviathan, 2010) and Egypt (Zohr, 2015) have led to a reevaluation of the importance of the region.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the recent rapprochement between Türkiye-Israel can be a game changer for Türkiye with regards to the ongoing dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Up to now, Türkiye’s main problem in the Eastern Mediterranean has been its loneliness in regional energy cooperation. The developments have shown that a broad coalition in the region ignores the rights of Türkiye and Northern Cyprus. Especially Southern Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and Egypt tried to isolate Türkiye and Northern Cyprus by leaving them out of the game in the past. The fact that Türkiye did not have a maritime jurisdiction agreement (EEZ or continental shelf areas) with

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<sup>2</sup> Kirval, Levent & Özkan, Arda, “The Delimitation Dispute of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkish Perspective Based on the Equitable Principles,” *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, Vol. 52, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> B. Shaffer, “Eastern Mediterranean Energy: A Decade After The Major Discoveries”, *Turkish Policy*, 27 November 2018. <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/936/eastern-mediterranean-energy-a-decade-after-the-major%20discoveries> (Accessed on 5 August 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Energy Information Administration, (EIA), “Overview of Oil and Natural Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean Region,” [https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis\\_includes/regions\\_of\\_interest/Eastern\\_Mediterranean/eastern-mediterranean.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/regions_of_interest/Eastern_Mediterranean/eastern-mediterranean.pdf) (Accessed on 20 September 2022).

the other littoral states decreased the effectiveness of Türkiye.

However, with the Continental Shelf Delimitation Agreement signed between Türkiye and Northern Cyprus in 2011 and the Memorandum of Understanding on the Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas signed between Türkiye and Libya in 2019, Türkiye has achieved a significant gain in the Mediterranean energy equation. Moreover, on 3 October 2022, Türkiye's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also signed a deal in Libya's capital allowing for oil and gas exploration in Libya's Mediterranean waters, three years after the maritime border deal that angered the EU.

During the last decade, the EU and the U.S. have supported the position of Greece and Southern Cyprus in the maritime delimitation dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Remarkably, the EU clearly supported Greece in the conflict of Eastern Mediterranean as Greece is an EU member state. The so-called Seville Map, drawn by professors at Seville University with a mandate from the European Commission, summarizes the Greek position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Based on the International Law of the Sea, the official Greek position is that all islands generate EEZ. The Seville map is based on this position. That said, the Seville Map is not an official EU document but just a study conducted by an external institution. However, the EU has used this map regularly in the past in some of its publications such as official documents and websites.

The rapprochement between Türkiye and Israel may also influence the EU's position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it may alter the U.S. stance with regards to the delimitation of maritime borders in the region. Currently, the EU and the U.S. support the Greek and South Cypriot position. However, improving relations between Türkiye and Israel may change this position. The EU and the U.S. obviously do not want to see a hot conflict between Greece and Türkiye, important NATO allies in the region. Therefore, they might be willing to act as mediators to solve this conflict. In this context, the recent rapprochement between Türkiye and Israel may also help the solution of the dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Also, with regards to the transportation of the Eastern Mediterranean's gas reserves to Europe, Türkiye is the most feasible route. The biggest aim of Israel, which discovered natural gas on its shores starting in 2010, is to sell this gas to Europe. And the most economical way to transport Israeli and Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe is through Türkiye. Therefore, Türkiye and Israel can reap economic and diplomatic gains if they act together to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas.

Also, Israel needs to make geo-strategic balancing with Türkiye in the region. Recently, Israel has strengthened its relations with Cyprus and Greece regarding diplomatic, economic, security cooperation and even tourism. However, leaving Türkiye entirely out of the game, the strongest country of the region with a big Muslim population, may create several problems for Israel. In this context, Israel will surely wish to improve relations with Türkiye in the future.

In the past, Israel decided to deliver gas to Europe not via Türkiye, but through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline (Eastmed Pipeline) line, which follows the Crete-Greece and Italy routes. In this context, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum was established, which brought together eight countries, including France, Italy, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Palestine and Jordan. However, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline Project, which was standing with the tacit support of the EU and the USA, was stopped due to the USA's withdrawal of its support from the project. This line was longer and more arduous than the Turkish option and was very costly as it involved deep sea crossings. In this context, following the cancellation of this project, the Türkiye route again increased its importance with regards to transportation of Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe.

Recently, Israel and Lebanon have also reached an agreement on where to draw the maritime border between their countries. The crux of the conflict was who gets to drill for natural gas in disputed waters off the Mediterranean coast. With this agreement, both Israel and Lebanon will be able to drill gas peacefully in the waters of the Mediterranean in their respective areas, and the transportation of this gas to Europe will again be a fundamental issue. The distance between the Israeli and Lebanese fields and mainland Türkiye is approximately 500 kilometers. Hence, the pipeline length that needs to be built is only a quarter of the recently canceled Eastmed project. This means that the project's cost is reduced at the same rate. In addition, the depth of the route is more reasonable than the other. Also, there are existing pipelines that traverse Türkiye from one end to the other and connecting this new line to Türkiye's existing systems is easy. In this context, Türkiye is the most advantageous option in terms of both shorter and cheaper routes, and construction time.

With regards to the Eastern Mediterranean maritime borders dispute, it is evident that Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus should find a peaceful solution. At its current stage, both Türkiye's and Greece's positions are rather maximalist. A medium position between the claims of both sides should be indeed searched for. In this context, a mediator power such as U.S. or EU can help the solution of the current dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Similarly, the U.S. recently played the mediator role in the latest agreement between Lebanon and Israel concerning their maritime borders.

In this context, without a mediator, it is complicated for the conflicting claims of Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus (North and South) to reach a peaceful solution.

The EU may indeed act as a mediator; however, for this to happen, it should also understand and value the Turkish position to some extent, which, for Türkiye and Northern Cyprus, is indeed compatible with the International Law of the Sea. Instead of following such a neutral position, the EU clearly supported the Greek and Southern Cyprus' claims in the past, making the solution to the Eastern Mediterranean maritime borders dispute an arduous task.

Keeping Türkiye, the most powerful country with the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean, lonely in this dispute surely does not help. In this context, Israel's rapprochement with Türkiye may also decrease Türkiye's loneliness in this dispute. One other significant development is the recent improvement of relations between Türkiye and Egypt. This may further reduce Türkiye's loneliness in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute. In addition to all these, if the U.S. or EU also intervene as neutral actors and potential mediators, the solution to the problem will be found more easily.