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## EDITORIAL OFFICE / YAYIN İDARE ADRESİ

Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66 GOP/Çankaya, 06700 Ankara/Turkey

Tel: +90.312.551-2100 • Fax: +90.312.551-2190

editor@insightturkey.com • www.insightturkey.com



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

MUHITTIN ATAMAN

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After being the focal point of the regional and global power competition for centuries, the Eastern Mediterranean region has recently re-emerged as a point of convergence in international politics. Over the last two decades, especially, many regional and global powers have begun to develop strategies toward the Eastern Mediterranean leading to a fierce rivalry amongst them. There are several reasons for the increase in the political, strategic, and economic importance of the region. However, four are especially noteworthy, and while two are long-standing factors, there are two significant novel developments that have contributed to the re-emergence of the strategic importance of the region.

First, the main deep-seated reason stems from its geostrategic and geopolitical importance. The Eastern Mediterranean hosts some of the most strategic seaways in the world, such as the Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits. While the Suez Canal has served as the main sea passage bridging the East to the West since its opening in 1869, the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) has for centuries connected the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea and so the Atlantic Ocean.

Second, due to its strategic importance the Eastern Mediterranean region has always been one of the most penetrated regions in the world. Many global and regional powers such as the U.S., Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Saudi

Arabia continue to intervene into regional affairs resulting in power struggles. While the U.S. is trying to maintain its superiority in the region following the Cold War period, Russia aims to reach the warm seas, its long-time strategic objective. On the other hand, the UK, France, and Turkey are working to protect their historical and imperial links with the region.

Starting with President Obama, the U.S. has followed a retrenchment policy which has resulted in power vacuums in different regions including the Eastern Mediterranean. Under these circumstances the Western-dominated regional system and political stability has changed dramatically, and the power vacuum created after the U.S. downsized its regional role is filled by many other challenger states. One of these states is Russia which seems to have settled itself into the region permanently. From now on, it will be quite difficult to extricate Russia from the region and without doubt it will continue to pose a threat from the south to European countries. China is another actor that has gained a foothold in the region lately by improving its relations with some regional countries and by investing in the control of significant seaports. Furthermore, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have also started trying to influence the regional balance of power. Consequently, all the cards are reshuffled in the Eastern Mediterranean and a new great game is underway in the region.

Third, as the most significant novel development, the exploration of natural gas in the region has contributed to its geostrategic importance. Considered as one of the richest deposits with approximately 4.5 percent of the total natural gas reserves in the world, the Eastern Mediterranean has become of great interest to the energy market. The drilling activities performed to date show that essential portions of the reserves range from the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields, where the coasts of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel meet, to the West Nile Delta field along the Egyptian coast. Within this framework, the regional and global powers have turned their attention to the region once again as the newly discovered rich energy resources have entered into the equation as a new parameter. Israel is the first state that discovered natural gas in Tamar (318 billion cubic meter) and Leviathan (605 billion cubic meter) fields and began to use and export it to other countries. Egypt and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC) also discovered natural gas in the Zohr (850 billion cubic meter) field and Aphrodite (129 billion cubic meter) field, respectively. Furthermore, lately, a considerable amount of gas reserves was discovered in the Calypso and Glaucus fields located in the South of Cyprus. As new discoveries continue, other countries such as Turkey have been conducting offshore drilling activities to explore natural gas. All these activities have defrosted the longtime frozen problems of the region.

The region is not rich only in terms of offshore natural gas reserves. It is known that some areas within the boundaries of Egypt and Libya are also rich in natu-

ral gas. Having the Wafa and Bouri gas fields, Libya is ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the world with around 1.5 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves. Egypt ranks as 16<sup>th</sup> in the world, with the Zohr, West Nile Delta, and Atoll fields yielding a total of around 2.2 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. It must be said that the reason many global and regional players have become involved in the Libyan civil war is closely related to its abundant energy resources.

Furthermore, it is important to state that the Eastern Mediterranean is quite rich in terms of crude oil as well. Considering onshore and offshore reserves together, the region possesses nearly 3.7 percent of the world's total oil reserves with around 64 billion barrels discovered to date. Libya alone has nearly 3.2 percent of the world's oil reserves, with roughly 48.4 billion barrels, and Egypt has around 3.3 billion barrels of known oil reserves.

Fourth, besides the three protracted crises, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the political crisis in Lebanon, and the Cyprus question, two more recent regional political issues, the Syrian and Libyan crises, have been attracting the attention of many regional and global powers. The external involvement of some new actors in these crises has led to a new power struggle. Turkey and Russia are the two main states that have increased their presence in the region lately by becoming the two main powers involved in the Syrian and Libyan crises. Needless to state, their military intervention in these crises has undermined the status of the traditional Western colonial powers, such as France.

As a country that has the longest shores in the Eastern Mediterranean and as one of the main players in regional geopolitics, Turkey has begun to increase its military presence in the region in order to deter anti-Turkish developments. The geography has begun to occupy a critical role in Turkey's political, security, and economic policies, and eventually has become one of the most featured parameters in Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey's regional policy is shaped by a number of factors. First of all, the Eastern Mediterranean has long-standing importance for Turkey, which has historical ties with almost all regional states. For centuries the region was ruled by Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, Turkey's involvement in regional crises such as Libya, Syria, and Palestine can be partially explained by the historical ties between Turkey and these states.

Second, the Eastern Mediterranean plays a crucial role in Turkey's security and as a result Turkey's foreign policy towards the region is highly shaped by its security concerns. Therefore, the policies of global powers such as the U.S., the European Union, and Russia towards the region are intrinsically linked to Turkey's security. As all these actors pursue their own national interests, it has

resulted in the U.S., EU, and Russia conflicting with Turkey's policies and expectations in the region. This has become clear on issues such as the Cyprus problem and the attempts of the Greek side to sign international agreements regarding the maritime jurisdiction zones. Both of these developments aim at eliminating Turkey's influence over the island and the region altogether. However, Turkey has made it clear that this is not something that it will accept, and has responded by signing agreements with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Libya, in 2011 and 2019 respectively.

Third, the Eastern Mediterranean is critical both for its abundant energy resources and for the bilateral economic relations between Turkey and the countries of the region; therefore, the economy is another factor determining Turkish policy towards the region. Turkey, an energy-dependent country that expects to discover new resources in its continental shelf, considers the rich hydrocarbon potential of the region as an alternative source of meeting its energy demands. Turkey seeks to both decrease its foreign dependence on energy and to increase its trade, first with neighboring countries and then with the world. In this regard, when forming its Eastern Mediterranean policy, Turkey is, on the one hand, intensely searching for natural gas and oil on its continental shelf and following policies towards transferring the resources found in other countries' maritime zones to the Western markets through Turkey, and, on the other hand, trying to improve its relations with the countries in the region.

The developments that threaten Turkey's economic and security interests have urged Ankara to a closer involvement with the region. Tensions have risen with Greece's eagerness to give its islands maritime jurisdiction zones beyond their territorial waters, which will cut into Turkey's continental shelf and the GASC's licensing of maritime blocks to international companies for energy research activities. Violating the TRNC and Turkey's rights, and, with the aim of making their illegal actions permanent, their signing of agreements in close cooperation with Israel, Egypt, and the U.S., as well as conducting joint military operations will not contribute to the resolution of the problems.

Within this framework, this issue of *Insight Turkey* highlights different affairs regarding the Eastern Mediterranean region. A number of leading and well-known intellectuals and academicians have contributed to this issue focusing on political, legal, and energy dimensions of maritime tensions and the rise of a new geopolitics in the region.

This issue includes pieces that look at the Eastern Mediterranean tensions through the lens of international law. Ayfer Erdoğan's research article examines the legal and political dimensions of the disputes by analyzing the standpoints of the main actor's in the region. Meanwhile, the commentary written

by Sertaç Hami Başeren reviews their justifications with reference to international law, with particular reference to Turkey's actions. Furthermore, based on the principle that maritime delimitation should be carried out to reach an equitable solution by taking all the relevant circumstances into account, Yücel Acer argues that Turkey has developed a comprehensive legal approach as to the maritime delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean and even submitted a map to the UN to demonstrate Turkey's claimed continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) areas.

While keeping up with the recent developments in the United States, Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney and Vişne Korkmaz's research article examines how and why Washington has come to embrace the logic of 'Alliance Axis' to shape the Eastern Mediterranean and explores the projected impact of the U.S.-initiated Abraham Accords on regional geopolitics. Meanwhile, Muhammad Soliman Alzawawy's commentary aims to forecast the route and different scenarios that the new American President Joe Biden will take in his foreign policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean region through investigating the content of his speeches and rhetoric before and shortly after taking office. Galip Emre Yıldırım highlights the stance of another actor in the region by arguing that France's identification of Turkey as an 'external enemy' reflects the former's political and economic concerns with regard to the Mediterranean gas reserves.

Sohbet Karbuz gives an overview of the key commercial, technical, legal, and political challenges the East Mediterranean gas faces, with a critical eye and proposes possible ways to overcome them. Karbuz discusses the challenges facing the monetization of the discoveries by looking at both the commercial challenges hampering the exploration and field development activities and the technical challenges for exporting gas to the immediate and distant markets.

In addition to these eight pieces focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean, there are some insightful manuscripts on a range of topics regarding the recent developments in the international political arena.

With regard to the recent changes at the level of the white house, Inderjeet Parmar analyses President Donald Trump's attempted coup. Parmar also questions the political will of the new President to extirpate Trumpism and white supremacy from the U.S. body politic.

After three-and-a-half-years into the crisis that struck the heart of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Marwan Kabalan sheds light on how the 41<sup>st</sup> Gulf Summit in the Saudi city of al-Ula, brought the blockade of Qatar to an end.

From our off-topic research articles, Nikolay Kozhanov tries to prove the importance of the economic factors for the current development of Russia's

relations with the Gulf States. He also assesses the prospects for continued economic cooperation between the GCC states and Moscow.

Ramazan Erdağ's article concludes this issue with a discussion on why Russia replaced the South Stream project with the TurkStream by changing its route and name, and why Turkey is involved in a project on the North-South line although it plays a vital role in the Trans-Anatolia Natural Gas Pipeline Project in the southern gas corridor.

While the importance of the region certainly is going to increase in the following years as more regional and global actors will be included in the power struggle, it is necessary to analyze and understand the issue from geopolitical, economic and legal standpoints. With that said, we are confident that this issue of *Insight Turkey* entitled "New Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean" will provide timely studies regarding the Turkish perspective on a complex and increasingly important issue in the global power struggle. ■