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Beyond Energy:

The Significance of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum

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The Energy Ministers of Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority met in Cairo in mid-January 2019 to discuss the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which will serve as the umbrella for cooperation and dialogue regarding the development of gas resources in the region. While the subject of energy is the basis for the forum, there are also broader geostrategic processes that led to its establishment, and they reflect the regional states' shared perceptions regarding the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean to their national security. The countries of the region could leverage these processes into additional partnerships in the Eastern Mediterranean, beyond the issue of gas resources. However, to serve as a base for long term regional strategic development, the Gas Forum must achieve other objectives: strengthen regional recognition – particularly in Arab countries – of the potential value of cooperative relations in the Eastern Mediterranean that include Israel; increase the human and civic interactions between all peoples of the region; and continue to foster the concept of a shared regional space.

On January 14, 2019 the Egyptian Petroleum Minister, Tarek el-Molla, hosted the Energy Ministers of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority to discuss the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). This body, with headquarters in Cairo, will serve as the umbrella for cooperation and dialogue regarding the development of gas resources in the region. At the close of the meeting, the Ministers announced the start of official talks about the structure of the Forum and the aim to draft recommendations for the next meeting, in April. While the subject of energy is the basis for the forum, there are also broader geostrategic processes that led to its establishment. The countries of the region could leverage these processes into additional partnerships in the Eastern Mediterranean, beyond the issue of gas resources.

Linking Cooperation Triangles in the Eastern Mediterranean

The intention to establish the Gas Forum was first announced in October 2018 at the summit of the leaders of Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus in Crete. The Forum is the first link of its kind following the tripartite alliances that Egypt and Israel have each forged with Greece and Cyprus, and the result of the gas export deal from Israel to Egypt signed in

February 2018. The Forum reflects that these triangular relationships not only do not become competing systems between the two countries, but actually form points of contact. Aside from the gas discoveries, the Forum derives from Turkey's growing assertiveness in the Mediterranean arena, and the concern this arouses in the region. In addition, the Forum represents a response by the various players to Egypt's desire to become a regional energy hub, based on its gas liquefaction facilities.

The Gaza flotilla (Mavi Marmara) incident and the economic crisis in Greece were among the main triggers for the creation of the Israel-Greece-Cyprus relationship, which began to take shape in 2010. Despite Israel's concern that the extreme left party Syriza, which came to power in Greece in 2015, would insist on cooler relations with Israel, in fact the opposite occurred, and relations grew closer. Even the normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey signed in June 2016 did not arrest the development of relations between Israel and Greece and Cyprus, in part because less than two years after it was signed, relations between Israel and Turkey deteriorated again and there are no ambassadors in Ankara and Tel Aviv. Since January 2016, the Prime Minister of Greece, the President of Cyprus, and the Prime Minister of Israel have held tripartite summits. The fifth – and most recent – summit was held in Beer Sheva in December 2018 and focused on innovation and cyber issues. In addition, there are numerous areas of cooperation between the countries, including, inter alia, military cooperation and preparation for emergencies. Given the range and depth of cooperation, agreement was reached in Beer Sheva regarding the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Nicosia, which would assist with the management of the triangular relationship. The United States also supports progress in the relations between Israel and Greece, evidenced by the comment by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who said to the Greek Foreign Minister in the December 2018 strategic dialogue that the US was “pleased to see that Greece emerges again as the leading force of regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Similarly, the Egypt-Greece-Cyprus triangle has grown closer in recent years around shared interests in the field of economy and security. This was reinforced by the tension between Turkey and the three countries, and the alliance is also anchored by a permanent secretariat in Nicosia. Since 2015 the leaders of the countries have met in six summit meetings devoted to coordination on several matters, including economic borders in the Mediterranean, gas pipelines from Cyprus to the LNG plants in Egypt, connection of the electrical networks, development of tourism, the struggle against illegal immigration, and joint navy and air force training practices. The three-way link helps Egypt promote its interests vis-à-vis the European Union, and also helps Greece and Cyprus promote their interests in Africa. In addition, the United States and the European Union see it as a guarantor for promoting the interests of American and European gas companies in the Eastern Mediterranean, and reducing European dependence on Russian gas.

Geostrategic Processes in the Eastern Mediterranean Come of Age

The formation of the Gas Forum reflects the regional states' shared perceptions regarding the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean to their national security. While Greece and Cyprus have traditionally seen the Mediterranean as their chief strategic space, for Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, this marks a certain change in their strategic concepts. The shared Mediterranean orientation is a consequence of three in-depth processes:

- a. The growing weight of pragmatic realpolitik considerations over rigid ideologies: Regional states do not consider links in the Mediterranean – at least at present – as “permanent alliances” based on a shared ideological or cultural ethos, but as “flexible and instrumental alliances” that rely on economic and energy interests and on willingness to cooperate in dealing with common security challenges.
- b. Redefinition of regional geographical units: the growing reference to the Eastern Mediterranean in terms of a “region” in itself illustrates the increasing weight of geo-economic considerations over geo-political considerations. As explained by Egyptian scholars associated with the official line such as Muhammad Fayez Farahat and Abdel Monem Said Aly, in the 21st century a shared territorial border is no longer an essential condition for the creation of regional blocs. Moreover, the shared economic interest of the Eastern Mediterranean can dwarf the influence of differences between states and peoples, and provide the basis for the creation of an area of mutual prosperity.
- c. The development of a Mediterranean identity: shared interests in the Mediterranean are accompanied by a growing discourse on a shared regional ethos and the need for greater closeness and mutual inspiration between the states and their peoples. For Israel, development of relations in the Eastern Mediterranean is part of the reincarnation of the “peripheral alliance,” which originally was designed to overcome Israel's regional isolation. For Egypt, belonging to the Mediterranean is seen as a means to overcome its current economic crisis, and as a chance to strengthen its leading position in regional and international arenas, expressed inter alia by the location of the Gas Forum headquarters in Cairo. Greece also seeks a central role in the region, in view of the advantages deriving from its membership in NATO and the European Union. In the cases of Greece and Cyprus, the assumption is that through cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, these two countries can overcome some of the negative consequences of their demographic numerical inferiority to Turkey.

Significance

Although officially the Gas Forum is open to other countries, the meeting in Cairo did not include delegates from Turkey, Lebanon, or Syria. Their absence is not surprising, given the disputes surrounding gas fields between Turkey and Cyprus and between Israel and Lebanon. Nonetheless, this illustrates the limitations of cooperation in the Eastern

Mediterranean, where players who were excluded from the Forum have an interest in working against closer ties between the member countries. Indeed, Turkey's plans to conduct the largest naval drill in 20 years in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, and Black seas in March 2019 can be seen as a kind of response to the establishment of the Gas Forum. In fact, it can be argued that just as concerns over Iran are a spur to growing contacts between Israel and the Arab Gulf states, so the Turkish challenge is a spur to closer relations between Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In addition, the Forum has drawn criticism from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and from trade unions in Jordan, who are against the promotion of normalization with Israel, as expressed in the formation of a regional body that includes Israel alongside Arab countries. However, there are a number of factors helping the new regional coalition: the deep economic interests behind cooperation on energy; the restriction of the Forum to specific issues regarding gas; the participation of the Palestinian Authority in the Forum, which also endows more legitimacy for the Jordanian and the Egyptian membership; Egypt's determination to establish its position as a regional energy hub and seize this card from Turkey; and the active support of Greece, Cyprus, and Italy for the Forum, alongside the backing of the European Union and the United States.

So far, the Gas Forum states have focused on the pragmatic interests and have refrained from invoking regional common denominators affecting Mediterranean history and culture or fostering links between peoples. In addition, the Arab members of the Forum – chiefly Egypt and Jordan – have kept a low profile in media coverage. Consequently, a headline on an independent Egyptian website depicted the Forum's establishment as "one small item for the press, one giant development in policy" – a takeoff of Neil Armstrong's famous statement. And indeed, the Forum has important economic and symbolic value. Yet for it to serve as a base for long term regional strategic development, it must achieve other objectives: strengthen regional recognition – particularly in Arab countries – of the potential value of cooperative relations in the Eastern Mediterranean that include Israel; increase the human and civic interactions between all peoples of the region; and continue to foster the concept of a shared regional space.