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**A Stormy Mediterranean: The Turkish-Greek Conflict Returns to
Center Stage**

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Following the signing of an agreement demarcating the maritime border between Turkey and the Government of National Accord in Libya, which *inter alia* disregards Greece's claim that Rhodes and Crete have the right to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), Ankara is threatening to send drillships in the coming months to the area where these islands are located. Turkey has already made good on similar threats in the past, when it sent drillships into the EEZ of Cyprus. The Turkish threat was issued against the backdrop of many years of disagreement between Turkey and Greece regarding the EEZ demarcation between them and sovereignty over some of the Greek islands. Additional sources of tension between Turkey and Greece include Ankara's intention to turn Hagia Sophia in Istanbul back into a mosque and the Turkish attempt to transport refugees from Syria to the border between the countries. The increasing tension in Turkish-Greek relations was among the topics discussed during the Greek Prime Minister's visit to Israel on June 16, 2020. In light of Israel's increasingly close relations with Greece, it is doubtful whether it will be able to remain indifferent to these developments. Greece has warned Israel that if Turkey overpowers Greece on these issues, Ankara's self-confidence will rise, causing an increase in the threat that Turkey poses to Israel.

The June 16, 2020 visit to Israel by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as part of the fourth government-to-government meeting (G2G) between the two countries, was notable in a number of ways. First, it was Mitsotakis's first trip outside Greece since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was intended in part to set a target date for the renewal of tourism between the two countries. The date set during the meeting was August 1, although it is doubtful whether this target will be met, due in part to the rising coronavirus infection rate in Israel. Second, a number of statements were made during the visit against Turkey. For example, in an interview in *Yediot Ahronot*, Mitsotakis said, "Turkey is undermining stability in the region. It aims to control politically and militarily the entire area of the Eastern Mediterranean...Turkey is welcome to give up its imperial pipe-dreams and become part of our area of cooperation. But, only as an equal, lawful partner, not as the neighborhood bully." During the visit, Greece's National Security Advisor Alexandros Diakopoulos told the i24 television network that: "If Greece

capitulates...if they [Turkey] manage to corner us and to put us out of the picture, then Israel at some point will suffer. Turkey will become a threat for Israel, bigger than Iran.” These statements reflect the increasing tension in Turkish-Greek relations over the past two years, and fact that it will be difficult for Israel to remain indifferent to these developments, as Ankara’s mounting self-confidence will also find expression in negative measures in the Israeli context.

Control over the islands in the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea has constituted a point of friction between Turkey and Greece for decades. In addition to the dispute regarding sovereignty over some of the islands, there is also fundamental disagreement regarding the demarcation of their maritime borders. Ankara refuses to sign the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, claiming that a fair demarcation of the maritime borders in the Mediterranean Sea requires giving more weight to Turkey’s long shoreline than to the scattered Greek islands, and that it is sometimes necessary to disregard their existence. This issue has become increasingly charged in recent months, following the signing of the November 2019 agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya. This agreement sets the maritime border between the two countries according to the Turkish position, contrary to the Greek argument that Libya and Turkey share no border in the Mediterranean Sea.

In late May, Turkey announced a drilling plan in the EEZ it claims to have received under its agreement with Libya, in particular adjacent to the islands of Crete and Rhodes. Greece, which regards this plan as a provocation and a challenge to its sovereignty, has clarified its opposition to the planned drilling by the Turks, and is mobilizing its allies to denounce the Turkish activity in the region. Turkey’s ambassador to Greece, on the other hand, has announced that his country does not intend to abandon the drilling, and the Turkish Foreign Minister has reiterated that not all the Greek islands have a continental shelf. As this issue pertains to what each side regards as a matter of principle in terms of its sovereignty, it appears that the parties will have a difficult time making meaningful concessions in this context. This is despite the fact that both have stated their willingness to engage in a dialogue, and that on June 26 Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had a telephone conversation and discussed a variety of issues.

Another matter that has aroused division and anger in Athens is the increasing noise by official parties in Turkey suggesting that Hagia Sophia in Istanbul will soon be converted into a mosque. Hagia Sophia, which UNESCO has named as a World Heritage Site, was built as a Greek Orthodox church during the Byzantine era, has been a symbol of the Byzantine Empire, and is considered an important part of Greek heritage. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottoman Empire, the structure became a mosque. In 1934, according to a decision by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, the site was turned into a museum. Since then, converting the structure

back into a mosque has been one of the most important symbolic struggles of Islamic conservative elements in Turkey. In recent years, the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, the Diyanet, has started supporting the idea, and since 2016 it has, from time to time, conducted Qur'an readings at Hagia Sophia that are broadcast by the Turkish state media. The campaign to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque is popular throughout the Turkish public; according to a survey conducted in June at the initiative of a pro-government newspaper, *Yeni Safak*, approximately 73 percent of respondents supported converting the site into a mosque, with particularly strong backing among supporters of the Justice and Development Party. In 2019, Erdogan stated that it was a very big mistake to turn the mosque into a museum. This past May, around the day commemorating the anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople, the issue was addressed again. Turkey's Council of State is expected to make a final decision on the matter on July 2, and the local media has specified July 15 as a possible date for first prayers to take place. "If Greece does not know its place," Erdogan said following criticism from Greece on the issue, "Turkey knows how to answer."

Another source of tension has been the crisis since March surrounding Ankara's intentional transport of refugees to the border between Turkey and Greece. Turkey, which has more than 3.5 million refugees from Syria within its borders, is trying to increase pressure on the European Union to provide it with economic and political assistance in order to contend with the issue and to prevent additional refugees from entering its borders, particularly from Syria's Idlib District. In late February, Ankara announced that it would not stop any more refugees from crossing the border, and organized action was also taken to bring refugees by bus to the border between Greece and Turkey. Greece has responded with aggressive measures against the refugees who tried to cross the border, and in mid-March, as a result of the pandemic and Europe's focus on coping with the illness, Ankara decided to reverse this measure. Still, the threat to encourage refugees again to cross the border remains on the table, and as Greece is the first and sometimes primary country affected by Turkish measures in this context, the tension surrounding this issue remains high.

The danger of Turkish-Greek tension reaching a high point in the coming months should raise concern in Jerusalem. To be sure, Greece and Turkey have a long history of managing the conflict between them, and presumably Greece will try to contain the threats from Ankara without being drawn into a direct military confrontation. It can also be assumed that it is in Turkey's interest to refrain from significant escalation. However, the risk of deterioration into violence remains due to Turkish activism, as well as the Greek desire to place limits on Ankara's aspirations. If Ankara and Athens reach the point of broad armed conflict, Athens will expect Israeli backing that goes beyond rhetorical expressions of support, in light of the increased military cooperation between

the countries. In addition, since its agreement with the GNA in Libya, Turkey has been promoting an agreement to demarcate its maritime border with the Palestinian Authority. Although the significance of this measure should not be overstated, it is liable to constitute a constraint for Israel and, overall, to result in increased Turkish maritime activity near Israel's coastline. Greece recently signed an agreement concerning the demarcation of its maritime border with Italy and is in the midst of advanced contacts to sign such an agreement with Egypt. It has also received the support of France, which recently adopted a more aggressive stance toward Turkey regarding both its involvement in Libya and its activity in the Eastern Mediterranean. As both Turkey and Greece are members of NATO, an American diplomatic initiative is necessary to try to calm the tensions between them. At the same time, it appears that Washington's attention to the region is currently limited and hence there is increasing importance to the direct dialogue between Ankara and Athens. In light of the negative implications of an outright confrontation between Turkey and Greece for the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, many actors have a strategic interest in trying to mediate the conflict and, at the very least, to ease tensions between the two countries, even though the tensions are extensive and rooted.