

INSS Insight No. 1373, August 25, 2020

A Red Line for the Blue Homeland? The Maritime Border Demarcation Agreement between Greece and Egypt

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The maritime border demarcation agreement between Greece and Egypt signed on August 6, 2020 represents a direct counter-response to the maritime border demarcation agreement between Turkey and the Government of National Accord in Libya that was signed in November 2019. The Greece-Egypt agreement was described by leaders in Athens and Cairo as a new stage in their bilateral relations. Furthermore, it signifies an important step in solidifying an anti-Turkish axis in the Middle East, which is led by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, and supported by France and the United Arab Emirates. The struggle in the Eastern Mediterranean is over development and energy use rights and the competing desires of Egypt and Turkey to serve as regional energy hubs. This struggle also touches on the competition for political leadership in the Middle East and the tension between the pragmatic Arab states and the states supporting political Islam, led by Turkey and Qatar. Israel stands alongside Greece and Egypt, but has an interest in reducing overall tensions and maintaining stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, in order to realize economic cooperation with its neighbors and prevent the acceleration of regional arms races.

Increased tensions over the last few months between Turkey and Greece over disagreements regarding maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean have increased the risk of violent flare-ups in the region. Over the last few years the "Blue Homeland" doctrine has become dominant in Turkish public discourse. This doctrine regards defense of Turkey's maritime borders (as defined in Turkish – not Greek – eyes) as no less important than defense of its land borders. In February 2019, the Turkish fleet conducted the largest naval exercise in its history, codenamed Blue Homeland. The exercise was in part a response to the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) one month prior; Turkey is not a member of this forum.

In late 2019, after Turkey signed the agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, it released a plan for drilling gas and oil in areas Greece regards as its economic waters, and in July this year announced that it intended to send a research vessel in order to conduct seismic research. Turkish battleships prepared to travel

alongside the research vessel, and in response, the Greeks raised their military preparedness level. After German mediation efforts, the Turks suspended the dispatch of the research ship. In the wake of the signing of the maritime border agreement between Egypt and Greece on August 6, 2020, which the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned as "null and void," Ankara decided again to send the research vessel accompanied by battleships, while Greece sent its own battleships to the area. On August 12, a Greek battleship accidentally collided with a Turkish battleship accompanying the research boat, and limited damaged was caused to the Turkish ship, which was compelled to return to its base for repairs.

An additional volatile arena in the Eastern Mediterranean is Libya, where there is also potential for Turkish-Egyptian military clash. In the Libyan civil war the anti-Turkish axis supports the troops of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, while GNA troops led by Fayez al-Sarraj are aided by militias and mercenaries coordinated by Turkey. Egypt has economic and security interests in Libya; its principal interest is preventing Islamist forces from building up along its long western border. Achievements by pro-Turkish forces in Libya led Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to define the cities of Sirte and Jufra as a "red line" regarding Turkey's eastward advance. The Libyan eastern-based Parliament urged el-Sisi to send troops into Libya, and thus gave Egypt legitimacy to intervene militarily in the event that Turkey ignores its warning.

Motivations for Demarcating the Maritime Border

How and why Greece and Egypt were now able to agree on the demarcation of their maritime border is instructive, as previous negotiations between them did not produce an agreement. Greece has struggled and sometimes hesitated to reach official agreements with other states to demarcate its economic waters, due to its dispute with Turkey about its sovereignty over some Greek islands and the demarcation of the economic waters between the states. The heart of the Greek-Turkish dispute concerns the question of whether populated islands deserve the same radius of economic waters around them as do continental territories. The Convention on the Law of the Sea from 1982 supports the Greek position, but accepting Greek demands fully would be very problematic for the Turks, as this would leave them with relatively limited economic waters. Athens was concerned that concessions to Egypt would later be used by Turkey against it.

Even before reaching the agreement with Egypt, Greece managed in June 2020 to reach an agreement to demarcate its maritime border with Italy, and is in talks with Albania about signing a similar agreement (the Albanian Supreme Court struck down a 2009 agreement between Athens and Tirana to demarcate the continental shelf, due to "fundamental legal violations"). Although Cyprus reached agreements over the years about demarcating its economic waters with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007), and Israel

(2010), Greece avoided signing a similar agreement with Nicosia based on concerns of deterioration of the conflict in Cyprus. It seems that in light of Turkey's assertive policy and the need to act against the Libyan-Turkish agreement, Greece's position changed and now Greece and Cyprus are reconsidering signing a mutual agreement.

Egypt sees the demarcation of its maritime boundary with Greece as an additional boost to the flourishing strategic ties between the two states. It seeks to define a red line for Turkish activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, after setting a red line in Libya. The agreement also seeks to allow the two states to develop energy resources in their economic waters and promote the tripartite agreement for connecting the power grids of Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus, in light of Turkish-Libyan attempts to draw a maritime border that creates a buffer between them. An additional advantage of the agreement from Cairo's perspective is that any Turkish attempt to challenge it will now put Ankara in direct conflict with the European Union. The agreement with Greece gives Egypt more limited economic waters than it would have had it recognized the Turkish-Libyan agreement. It thus symbolizes Egypt's commitment to international law, as well as its loyalty to the anti-Turkish axis and Ankara's failure to put a wedge between Cairo and its Hellenic allies.

Greece and Egypt see the new agreement as an additional layer in the consolidation of the EMGF, which is expected to become an international organization soon and include France as a full member and the United States as an observer, in addition to its seven founding members. The agreement will also enhance the prospects for the EastMed pipeline project to export natural gas from Israel via Cyprus and Greece to Europe, which was approved by all three countries over the past few months in spite of the collapse of energy prices; this, despite increased doubts about the economic viability of the project. The normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE furthers strengthens the anti-Turkish axis, which is developing from an economic axis focused mainly on gas into a regional alliance that integrates economic, political, and security interests.

Greece and Egypt are not keen on a military confrontation with Turkey, and Ankara also has its reservations about a confrontation with a NATO member state. Egypt is currently dealing with severe economic challenges, with the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam crisis and with terror threats in the Sinai Peninsula, and thus sees being drawn into a direct military conflict with Turkey – which would obscure domestic development efforts that are its highest priority – as an undesirable last resort. At the same time, Cairo and Athens do not have high hopes for a political resolution that would calm relations with Ankara, especially while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan holds the reigns of power tightly and sticks to a political strategy that exudes neo-Ottomanism.

After the gas deal between Egypt and Israel was signed in 2018, el-Sisi stated that Egypt "scored a big goal," implying against the Turks; when the Greek-Egyptian agreement was signed Egyptian newspapers celebrated "a second goal." The demarcation of the maritime border is seen in Egypt and Greece as a key move in the diplomatic campaign against Turkey. In addition to demarcating their economic waters – and threatening to use force if these are penetrated – this campaign includes international pressure from NATO and the EU; exposure of the ties between Turkey and Islamist and Salafi-jihadist terror elements; and institutionalization of the gas forum, with the surrounding anti-Turkish axis around it. The overall objective of these moves is to contain Turkish influence in the region.

Implications for Israel

Israel must prepare for a variety of potential scenarios in the Greek-Egyptian confrontation with Turkey, from a military confrontation between Turkey and its rivals, continuing with an ongoing diplomatic campaign, and to pragmatic understandings between the parties. While it is clear which side Israel supports, the wider consequences of inclusion in the anti-Turkish axis in the Eastern Mediterranean have yet to be properly assessed. There are prices for Israel being drawn into the Greek-Turkish conflict and into the conflict in Libya, including the need to dedicate increasing attention to the region at a time of multiple domestic challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside the already existing external challenges, which are not erased by the pandemic. While most Turkish activity in the region is viewed by Jerusalem as negative, only a portion of it actually represents a direct threat to Israel and requires its response.

Israel attributes increasing importance to the Eastern Mediterranean due to gas resources and due to its multidimensional strategic significance, and thus has an interest in preventing crises in the region and maintaining it as a peaceful space. The creation of hard blocs in the Eastern Mediterranean will further aggravate the rivalry between Turkey and Israel. Deeper rifts between the competing camps, which will lead to an accelerated arms race by regional naval and air forces and challenge the existing balance of power, are also not desirable for Israel. While German mediation in the Libyan and Turkish-Greek conflicts can serve Israeli interests, Jerusalem should also encourage Washington to increase its involvement in the mediation efforts and play a leading role.

In light of the contradiction between the Greek-Egyptian agreement and Turkish-GNA agreement, the sides must come to an understanding between them on this issue in order to head off the danger of deterioration to an armed conflict. The ceasefire that was declared in Libya on August 21 represents a positive sign of comprehension among the different players of the need for compromise, in spite of existing difficulties. It may be that the discovery of gas in the Black Sea announced by Erdogan, also on August 21,

which represents the first discovery of a significant source of fossil fuel in Turkish territory, will allow an opening for certain Turkish flexibility. At the same time, the ongoing hardening of the blocs is cause for concern that such an opening will remain narrow and insufficient.