

## As Eastern Mediterranean's Waters Heat Up, Turkey Should Lead An OSCE-Type Initiative In The Middle East

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## Abstract

*The Turkish leadership has committed itself to a tough position on Israel, Cyprus and Syria, and any backtracking or sign of weakness will seriously affect its credibility at home, with regional partners, the “Arab Street” and other major global powers, as well as high stakes involved in the Eastern Mediterranean.*

*This represents a policy of principle, consistent with the values and goals the government pursues, but is also a risky one, which if not well*

*managed may lead to some undesirable hot confrontation. The power comes with responsibility if it will be effectively harnessed.*

*This commentary provides the backdrop, against which the recent events are taking place, speculates on the main drivers of the Turkish government, how other international actors view this simmering crisis, and concludes with a call for Turkey to lead an OSCE-type structure.*

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### *Key figures in policy- and decision-making*

*Turkey’s recent policy decisions and regional assertiveness regarding Israel, Cyprus and Syria have been formulated and implemented in primarily by*

- *Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Prime Minister),*
- *Ahmet Davutoglu (Foreign Minister as the architect of the new Turkish foreign policy),*
- *Hakan Fidan (head of Turkish intelligence, MIT, and before then, Erdogan’s confidante as the deputy undersecretary of the Prime Ministry),*
- *Taner Yildiz (Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, and the public face for the drilling crisis),*
- *General Necdet Ozel (the newly appointed chief of staff, who replaced General Isik Kosaner quitting on 29 July, along with other senior commanders, over the detention of 250 officers accused of plotting to overthrow the government),*
- *Zafer Caglayan (Minister of Trade and Industry, who coordinates the trade and investment dimensions of the government actions)*
- *Omer Celik (AKP’s deputy chairman and PM’s strategic advisor/speech writer),*
- *Feridun Sinirlioglu (MFA’s undersecretary and former Ambassador to Tel Aviv),*
- *Ibrahim Kalin (an academic, columnist and Prime Minister’s chief foreign policy advisor).*

## How did the crisis develop to what it is today?

Turkey has suddenly found itself managing rapidly escalating crises with its three Eastern Mediterranean neighbours: Israel, Cyprus and Syria. The reasons for each crisis are different – sovereignty, natural gas, regional power muscles, justice, but there is a common thread that connects them all and that leaves Ankara with some significant foreign policy and security challenges at a time when it requires so much “peace at home, peace abroad”. To be frank, this is quite a change from the days in the not too distant past when Ankara was aiming for “zero problems with neighbours”; now it is becoming, the joke goes, “Turkey’s no neighbour policy”.

Tensions over energy issues were simmering for years before the recent escalation. When Greek Cypriots unilaterally declared a decision to explore oil and gas in their exclusive economic zone back in 2003, Turkey reacted to this action right away. Current President Abdullah Gul was then Turkey’s foreign minister and engineered Turkey’s response, based on the premise that Turkish Cypriots, who run their own state in the north of the island, are also entitled to any hydrocarbon reserves found offshore. The crisis was shelved as a result at the time. Turkey has opposed drilling by the Cypriot government since plans were initially put forward in 2007, but Ankara did not take any significant action against the project until the drilling began; the deployment of the seismic survey vessel and supporting the TRNC’s own energy projects is Turkey’s way of catching up.

Then, in December 2010, Cyprus and Israel signed a maritime border agreement, and on September 19 this year, exploratory drilling for gas began in the Aphrodite gas field, off Cyprus’s southern coast and adjacent to the larger Leviathan field, which Noble Energy discovered last year off the coast of Israel. The Levant Basin, adjoining Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza, contains massive reserves of recoverable natural gas.

On September 23, Turkey sent a seismic research ship, Piri Reis, accompanied by three frigates, to explore the continental shelf northwest of

Cyprus, which includes areas claimed by both Greece and Cyprus. Prime Minister Erdogan said the Greek Cypriot move to explore gas was a blow to reunification talks between Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders. The Turkish energy minister Taner Yildiz threatened a blacklisting of companies involved in prospecting on behalf of the Greek Cypriots. He said Turkey too would be exploring off the northern half of the island, in response, but added that some areas earmarked for exploration by Turkey “clashed” with those of the Greek Cypriot administration.

Turkey, long a strategic ally of Israel, has now broken with it. Erdogan has denounced Tel Aviv as ‘the West’s spoilt child.’ In a passionate recent speech in Cairo, he warned Israel that it must ‘pay for its aggression and crimes.’ Supporting the Palestinians in their efforts to gain UN recognition as a state was, he declared, not an option but an ‘obligation’. Turkey, Iran and Egypt are thus asserting themselves against what they see as an Israeli upstart. Saudi Arabia too is breaking free from the constraints of the American alliance and cozying up with China and India.

## The Turkish drivers for heightened tensions

Turkey’s brinkmanship is not only responding to Cyprus’s bold move. Competition over what are likely to be enormous oil and gas reserves (note that Turkey is a major energy importer and relies on foreign imports 98 percent for natural gas and 92 percent for oil) is however a major reason for this new dynamic, but there are other forces also contributing to brinkmanship in the region including:

## Regional power ambitions of Turkey

Turkish leaders want to stay clear of the unnecessary projection of “hard power” in the region at a time when its “soft power” efforts have begun reaping fruits and they are keen on

avoiding the image of resurrecting Pax Ottomanica in the region.

There are many relationships Turkey must balance when implementing its policies, and all of these are intertwined. Turkey's relations with Israel affect its relations with the US. The Cyprus issue is connected with the EU, and likewise the Iran issue is related to Russia. The Armenian issue has an effect simultaneously on Turkey's relations with the US, the EU and Russia. Syria influences Turkey's relations with the Arab world and Europe. The future of Iraq and Maghreb is still up in the air and where major powers strive to predominate.

In the new division of power in the region, it is believed that the US and Russia have reached a common understanding: the former will be in control of the "game" in the Middle East and the latter will play the same role in Central Asia. And Turkey's role is important because it lies between the regions at stake. Other players left outside the "game" may not be content with this arrangement and do their best to step in as much as they can.

Erdogan's recent visit to the "Arab spring" countries in North Africa has created huge excitement, and much has been written about his rising popularity in the Arab world and Turkey's "regional power" role. He is no doubt an emotional leader who does not mince his words and do not care much about being politically correct.

He told Egyptians that the most important thing Arabs should learn from Turkey was secularism – a word that is almost a taboo in Cairo these days and so much disliked by Muslim Brotherhood. "Do not fear secularism because it does not mean being an enemy of religion. I hope the new regime in Egypt will be secular. Individuals cannot be secular, only states can. A devout Muslim can successfully govern a secular state," Erdogan said. Just as he was falling into his feud with Israel, he balanced this with a bold deal to use his country as the staging ground for a NATO missile defence system that uses huge radar installations to protect against Iranian missile attacks. He also joined a major anti-terrorism initiative with the United States as a co-chair.

Erdogan's eastern thrust, accompanied by large aid expenditures across the Middle East, North Africa and Somalia, is part of a strategy engineered by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to build Turkey's regional influence in order to avoid the multiple crises Turkey faced before 2000 when it was surrounded on all sides by menacing, unstable authoritarian states. Putting aside the fantasies of the "new sultan" and the like, all this says something about the changing dynamics of the new Middle East.

It is too simplistic to explain Erdogan's popularity in the Arab world simply in terms of Israel. He is popular because he is seen as a democratically elected leader who is charismatic, bold and proud of his Muslim identity and heritage. He represents the political and economic aspirations of the Arab and Muslim masses. His transformation of Turkish politics, economy and foreign policy is hailed as a "model" because the Arabs want to see the same values and principles implemented in their countries.

Arabs like him not because they want another sultan or emperor, who is nothing more than a Western fantasy for media consumption, but because his Middle East agenda corresponds to the essential values of the Arab revolutions.

## Conspiracy theories

Many Turks believe that what's happening today is not simple and without a reason. The attacks by the PKK that are growing even more savage, and the rising tension in the Aegean Sea and eastern Mediterranean are seen by most Turks as reflections of the new clash with Israel. In their view, "certain forces" are trying to prevent Ankara from taking an active role in defining the regional political game. The rivalry with Iran is now being expressed more loudly, the free trade area, which was to have been established with Syria, is forgotten, the tension with Israel is at its peak and the Cyprus issue is once again in the headlines.

It would not be a surprise if new difficulties arise with Armenia soon. Israel, Cyprus and Greece are seen by Ankara in an "enemy of my enemy is my

friend” mentality vis-à-vis Turkey. Since Ankara downgraded its relations with Israel to the level of second secretary, there have been significant rapprochements between Israel and both Cyprus and Greece.

Israel's foreign minister Lieberman reportedly said his country was planning a series of measures to retaliate against Turkey in an apology row, including military aid to the PKK. Other planned measures are cooperation with the Armenian lobby in the US in its efforts to win recognition for Armenian claims that 1.5 million Armenians were victims of a genocide campaign in the late Ottoman Empire.

Accordingly, Lieberman insists that the Israeli efforts should focus on ways to respond to Turkey's sanctions, not formulating an apology for the 2010 incident, because what Turkey is interested in is not an apology but exploiting the dispute with Israel so as to boost its regional standing. “We'll exact a price from Erdogan that will prove to him that messing with Israel doesn't pay off. Turkey better treat us with respect and common decency,” Lieberman was quoted as saying.

## Trade and investment drivers

With a GDP close to \$ 1 trillion and sustainably growing economy, Turkey's foreign and security policies must support its trade and investment efforts. Considering that exports are expected to hit an all-time record by reaching the \$130 billion mark by the end of 2011, it is still along way to go from this figure to \$500 billion by 2023. That is why the driving force behind Turkish foreign policy is and will remain to be trade and business interests.

The Turkish “brand” sells well in the region. But to call Turkey's new economic strategy “neo-Ottomanism,” or an “axis shift” from west to east, is a stretch. Business-wise, the Turks collaborate world-wide and will sell to anybody who's buying. Just two examples: The Ford plant at Golcuk will soon start supplying their small, efficient “Transit Connect” vehicles to the New York City taxi system. The Hong Kong billionaire

William Fung plans to use Turkey's well developed textile industry to manufacture the Kenneth Cole and Cerruti lines for sale around the planet.

Therefore, if we strip away the rhetoric it is not difficult to see that Turkey has been trying to establish itself as a “trading power” rather than seeking enhanced “political clout” in the region, although neither are exclusive of each other and are closely interlinked. Turkey is no longer an agricultural country and most of its population lives in urban centres. Many entrepreneurs in the heartland have successfully turned their medium-sized companies into big conglomerates trading on the stock exchange and looking for export opportunities.

As such, the Turkish government is under immense pressure from them to expand Turkish influence in regional markets and seek new ones. Otherwise how would we explain the Turkish prime minister's recent Arab Spring tour, during which he took over 200 businessmen with him on a visit to Egypt? Even in a primarily humanitarian visit to Somalia, he took the heads of major trade advocacy groups with him to plant the seeds for future economic gains. Turkey is positioning itself carefully in the face of the Arab Spring to make the best in the post-revolution era from a business perspective as well.

Erdogan knows very well that if its government loses big in trade or fails to secure access to new markets for Turkish businesses that are eager to sell their products, he will have a hard time clinging to power. Even with Israel, behind all this buzz and fuss, trade was pretty much protected. Turkey bought \$1.3 billion worth of Israeli goods in the first eight months of this year, which was 40 percent higher than the preceding year. Turkish businesses continued to sell automobiles, metals and machinery to Israeli clients worth around \$1.4 billion, marking a 20 percent increase in the first seven months.

## Cyprus as an obstacle to its EU accession process

It is of course the sovereign right of any state to engage in oil exploration and drilling activity in its territory, continental shelf or in the exclusive

economic zone – provided all parties to that particular area were not disputing the boundaries of the declared zone

There was already enough reason for Turkey and Greek Cypriots to struggle. The Greek Cypriot side, unilaterally exercising sovereignty as regards probable hydrocarbon deposits, reaches off the island and acquires the capability to further upset the economic disparity in its favour. This will not be conducive for a settlement on the island. Why should Greek Cypriots share “their” wealth with Turkish Cypriots?

“If the Cyprus peace negotiations are not conclusive and the EU gives its rotating presidency to southern Cyprus, the real crisis will be between Turkey and the EU,” Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay declared on September 19. “Our relations with the EU will come to a sudden halt.”

The Greek Cypriot president Christofias needed some excitement, a tool to distract attention from his total failure as Cyprus president. Turks would definitely explode if they had assigned an American company to explore for gas off Cyprus, close to the area where Israel found rich gas reserves. It would have been great if the Israelis, who are mad at Turks nowadays also, could be pulled into the spitting feud. And they indeed managed. Ankara expected that the financial turmoil currently engulfing Europe -- with Cyprus' main benefactor, Greece, at its epicenter -- would make Cyprus feel more vulnerable to Turkish pressure and thus more likely to take a step back.

## Anti-Israel policies expanded Erdogan's room for manoeuvre

The Turkish government maintains that it is not an enemy of Israel and the Turkish people are not historically hostile to the Jewish people. Erdogan's remarks, saying, “Our business is with the Israeli administration, not with the Israeli people,” reflect this sensitivity. Hard days are ahead of Israel, which is losing its friends one by one, but it would be a mistake for it to believe that European countries can substitute these lost friends.

The retreat of the US and Europe in terms of leadership and initiative makes Turkey's rising power inevitable and indispensable for peace. Turkey would be the only state to defend the legitimate rights of Israel against the Arabs in the future. In fact, the best partner to address Israel's growing security concerns is Turkey.

## International support?

Turkey might be heading for a hot confrontation in the region; it is not clear, however, how much international support Ankara has against Greek Cyprus and Israel. Turkey has been lobbying Washington and Brussels over potential risks of confrontation along the eastern rim of the Mediterranean if Greek Cypriots, backed by Israel, proceed with drilling as planned.

If Turkey can convince its Western allies that an additional headache in the eastern Mediterranean, which is already faced with complications amid revolutions, would not serve their national interests and would jeopardize stability in a fragile region, it may be able to enlist their support in curtailing the ambitions of the Greek Cypriots.

The US, keen to shift some of the responsibilities to regional powers such as Turkey, has a vital interest in not seeing two of its allies, Turkey and Israel, clashing in the hot waters of the Mediterranean. That two key allies in the region should be fighting in this way is a source of deep concern for the Obama administration. This is potentially a very messy diplomatic problem for President Obama. Washington may put pressure on Greek Cypriots to postpone drilling plans until the status of the divided island becomes clear.

The EU is already under stress because of the Eurozone crisis and does not have a coherent policy on how to respond to a growing debt crisis in Greece, as well as other troubled members in the queue. The EU's relatively muted response to Turkey in its standoff with Greek Cyprus is clearly displeasing to Greek Cypriots. Media reports suggest that both the EU Commission and the Polish-term presidency have advised Greek Cyprus not to start drilling activities at this



sensitive moment. It is very unlikely, however, that this advice will be taken, especially when there are other member states which oppose Turkish membership, and will be more than ready to use any confrontation between Greek Cyprus and Turkey to hit at Ankara. Turkey's relations with the EU are at their lowest point, and Ankara is unlikely to adjust its behaviour to please Brussels that appears unlikely to ever let Turkey join it.

By now a much wider catalogue of policy-making issues dominate meetings between American and Turkish decision makers. Latent anti-Americanism in Turkey is nothing the current government has cooked up, on the contrary, the present administration is trying as much as it possibly can to involve the Turkish public in its efforts to bring both nations closer together.

Greek Cypriots are also relying strongly on Russia's help in this new dispute with the Turkish side. Moscow's support is of course not surprising. Any show of force by Turkey against Greek Cyprus in the coming days could therefore leave Ankara and Moscow at odds. This will be on top of the recently unravelling package of the ambitious energy deal both sides faced.

The irony is that any confrontation between Turkey and Greek Cyprus over offshore drilling rights, or between Turkey and Israel due to Ankara's pledge to maintain safe passage in the eastern Mediterranean, may serve the interests of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at this present juncture. Any development that draws Turkey's attention away from Syria at the present time will be much appreciated by Assad who is fighting for his political survival. Such an outcome will also be to Iran's liking. Tehran is angry today at Ankara for its stance on Syria, and because it has decided to host key elements of the U.S.-led missile defence shield project which is clearly aimed at Iran.

## The way ahead

Turks realize that the soft power of Turkey is at times more powerful than their military assets in the region as NATO's largest army in Europe.

Turkey's adversaries will capitalize on the rhetoric of an outspoken Erdogan and will offer his harsh words as evidence that Turkey would be a "bullying neighbour" as it becomes more powerful and engages in a twist of strong-arm policies with its friends and foes alike.

Instead, Turkey should invest more in coalition building efforts in the eastern Mediterranean. The agreement with Egypt on joint gas and oil exploration in the region is an important step in this direction. It rendered the 2003 agreement of Egypt with the Greek Cypriot administration for cooperation on gas exploration as effectively useless. Turkey and Egypt, two powerhouses in the Middle East, may usher a new era in the Arab Street and change the power balance for the better.

The UK is the closest European power which understands and supports Turkey in the region as well as within the EU. There is however a risk that British-Turkish relations could also be overshadowed by the potential conflicts as all of these go back to the First World War: influence in Egypt, Sudan and its neighbours, Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, the Levant and the Caucasus - Turkey and Britain, and for that matter, France, Russia and the US, were on different sides then, and could well be so again now.

If Turkey's current move away from "enemies" is not genuine, it could leave Ankara with "few friends" other than those that feel encouraged by its role as a Muslim lead secular nation on the other side of the Mediterranean which in turn reinforces the worries in Cyprus, Israel, the Gulf and the Caucasus that the EU, US and Russia will share the more they come to agree on "spheres of influence".

Erdogan's eastern turn is a welcome and beneficial development for Turkey and the West - in good part because it could herald the eclipse of the radical Islamic powers' dangerous influence over the Arab states, but also because what Erdogan is doing is hardly imperial or Islamist. Still, Ankara should not waste very valuable reputational capital it earned as a soft power in the region and should act prudently, responsibly and wisely - with a future vision in mind, rather

than responding to the developments as they occur, and in close partnership with its western and regional allies, as well as in keeping with the sentiments of the “street” in Turkey and neighbouring countries.

Otherwise, it could be pushed back by the “dark forces” to have to address some of its complex domestic problems again as happened during Turkey’s post-Soviet Union euphoria of creating “a Turkic world all the way from the Chinese Great Wall to the Adriatic coasts”. The current

state of affairs provides a golden opportunity to launch the long-talked initiative of creating an OSCE like structure in the Middle East to avoid an escalation of the numerous open and hidden conflicts and address deep seated regional problems as well as emerging opportunities in the three baskets of economy, security and human rights. And Turkey should take the lead in this initiative.

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