

## **THE NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA\***

*Efraim Inbar*

*Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies, and Fellow at the Middle East Forum*

The turmoil in the Arab world is changing the strategic landscape in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (the regions east of Meridian 20<sup>0</sup>), where elements of radical Islam are gaining control, turning it into an Islamic lake. A review of the political dynamics in that region generates great concern about the ability of the West to continue to enjoy freedom of action in this arena.

Evolving political events in Libya indicate that radical Islamic elements will definitely play a greater role in the future of the country. If the transition to a new regime descends into civil war, the ensuing chaos may allow greater freedom of action for Muslim extremists from the shores of this Mediterranean country.

Next to Libya is Egypt, where a Muslim Brotherhood candidate was elected for president, following a huge Islamist victory in the elections for Parliament. Moreover, the new President Morsi, seems to have established his control over the military, the bastion of the ancient regime.

Apart from managing important ports on the Mediterranean, Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, a waterway that links Europe to the Persian Gulf and the Orient. This is a critical passageway that fell in the hands of the Islamists.

Significantly, Egypt has already opened the Suez Canal to military vessels belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This enhances the ability of radical Iran to supply its Mediterranean allies, such as the Assad regime in Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Moreover, it has enhanced Iranian access to Muslim states in the Balkans, namely Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo, thereby increasing its influence in that part of the Mediterranean.

The tenuous control of Egypt over Sinai has weakened since the fall of the Mubarak regime. Sinai has become a highway for weapons smuggling into Gaza and a base for the activities of several Muslim terror organizations. This situation could lead to the "Somalization" of Sinai, negatively

---

\* Summary of presentation at the Conference *Security Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Relations Between Israel and Turkey*, which was organized by the Center for European and International Affairs of the University of Nicosia, on October 10, 2012.

affecting the safety of naval trade along the Mediterranean, the approaches to the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea.

Next to Sinai is Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, a radical Islamist organization allied with Iran. Israel's enforced naval blockade on Gaza has increasingly been criticized by the international community. Considering the recent political changes in Egypt and their detrimental impact on the Egyptian-Israeli relations, the containment of the Islamist threat from Gaza will become even more challenging in the near future.

North of Israel, along the Mediterranean coast, sits Lebanon, a state dominated by radical Shiite Hizballah whose ports are inhospitable from a Western perspective. Hizballah has already laid claim to some of the huge Israeli-found gas fields in the sea that could diminish Europe's energy dependence on Russia and Turkey. Moreover, Syria, an enemy of Israel and a current ally of Iran, exerts considerable influence in Lebanon. Its Mediterranean shores, north of Lebanon, are also hostile to the West and its ports even supply services to the Russian navy. The Assad regime in Syria faces great domestic opposition and may fall. Yet, similar to the current trends in the Arab world, the Syrian successor is likely to be Islamist and anti-Western.

The next state on the eastern Mediterranean coastline is the AKP-ruled Turkey. The country has over the past few years shifted away from a pro-Western foreign policy, instead adopting a radical stance on many issues. Its current government supports Hamas and Hizballah, opposes sanctions on Iran and holds strident anti-Israel positions – this reflects the AKP's clear Islamic coloration. Moreover, Turkey has displayed huge ambitions for leadership in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. A combination of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic-Jihadist impulses has pushed Turkey into an aggressive stance on several regional issues.

Turkey has flexed its naval muscles, threatening Israel that it will escort flotillas trying to break the blockade on Gaza. It has also threatened Cyprus in order to secure its share of the potential energy riches south of the island. Turkey is interested in gaining control over the maritime gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean as this would help fulfill its ambitions to serve as an energy bridge to the West, thereby creating a dependence on it. This may lead Turkish troops, stationed in the northern part of divided Cyprus, to complete under certain political circumstances the conquest of the island started in 1974. Such a Turkish takeover would not only serve geo-economic interests, but would constitute a significant Western loss of the strategically situated island.

Indeed the struggle in the Eastern Mediterranean will focus on Cyprus, particularly if Assad regime is removed. Turkish appetites might be whetted. The fall of the Assad regime will force Russia to look for a

substitute port in the Eastern Mediterranean, increasing its interest in the Republic of Cyprus, which is attractive also as an energy asset. The Cypriot island served as a bone of contention in the past between Persia and the ancient Greeks and between the Ottomans and Venetians – in short, it represents the struggle between East and West.

West of Turkey is Greece, a democratic Western state with a clear interest to protect the Cypriots from Muslim domination. Its current economic crisis, however, might erode its limited military ability to parry the Turkish challenge alone. Even the European powers, busy with stabilizing the Eurozone and with little appetite for military action, are unlikely to provide effective protection. With the exception of Israel, all other Eastern Mediterranean states would likely favor the return of Cyprus to Muslim rule and the ascendancy of Islam in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Western influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is being challenged by the growing radical Islamic influence in the region. The access of Iran to Mediterranean waters, the disruptive potential of failed states, and the competition across countries for energy resources is destabilizing the region. But it is not clear that Western powers, particularly the US, are aware of the possibility of losing the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to radical Islam or are preparing in any way to forestall such a scenario. Actually, the US signals withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean as it emphasizes its desire to increase its presence in the Pacific-Asia region. Foolishly the West believes that the so-called “Arab Spring” heralds an improved political environment and that Turkey represents “moderate Islam.” American naivete and European gullibility could become strategically extremely costly.