

## **IS AN 'ENERGY TETRAHEDRON' FEASIBLE IN THE SOUTH EAST MEDITERRANEAN?**

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Egypt, under the presidency of Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, is re-experiencing the implementation of the Mubarak doctrine on the country's regional alliances. Al-Sisi, one of the key figures during the uprising against Mohammad Morsi's regime in 2012, has been very clear about the way he sees Egypt's place in the world: Cairo strengthened its intelligence and military cooperation with Israel vis-à-vis the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip, which allegedly holds strong ties with Islamic factions in the Sinai peninsula. The Egyptian government clearly shows its strategic resilience to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, which has resulted in the renewal of the decades-long political alliance with other pro-Western Sunni Arab States, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. Al-Sisi does his best in order to show his differentiation towards the Muslim Brotherhood's brief control of political power under Morsi, adopting severe measures against radical political Islam, in order to remind to the West that Cairo is able to continue to bridge the Arab world and the West, as it did during the Mubarak era. Egypt is annoyed by Turkish and Qatari intrusiveness over the issues concerning the influence of political Islam in Egypt's political scene and in the Levant in general. At the same time, Egypt and the West are preoccupied with the unstable situation in neighboring Libya, while both keep a low profile towards Assad's secular regime in view of a Western-led coalition against the Islamic State.

President Al-Sisi's regional agenda shows that Mubarak's legacy in the country's foreign policy will continue to affect Egyptian decision-makers, following a brief period of pro-Islamic ambivalence that puzzled the country's traditional ties with Western countries in the Mediterranean, that shared a common past of good relations. One of those countries is the Republic of Cyprus.

In a volatile Middle East and South east Mediterranean, regional alliances do not remain stable. However, geographical facts do - and Cyprus has always been important for Egypt. During the '60s Gamal Abdel Nasser viewed Cyprus as a strategic ally that might reflect Cairo's regional endeavors through Nicosia's activity in the Non-Aligned Movement, despite - and due to - the fact that the island was an integral part of NATO's regional military presence. During the '70s and '80s Cyprus was an additional positive factor for Egypt's commercial and diplomatic relations with the West. Nevertheless, Cairo understood well that keeping a low profile over the continuing Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island was essential in order to prevent any undesired correlation

affecting Cairo's normalized, yet vulnerable, ties with Israel, a country which maintained a strong strategic alliance with Ankara for decades.

The Mavi Marmara incident in June 2010 severely affected the Turkish-Israeli coalition, while the newly founded natural gas resources within the Cypriot and Israeli EEZs' created a new reality, with imminent economic prospects as well as security concerns. During that time, the Egyptian political scene was facing severe agitations. Despite the fact that during these last two years President Al-Sisi and his military forces have proven their ability to control the country's political system, at the same time, jihadist paramilitary activity is still negatively affecting the exports of Egyptian natural gas to Israel and Jordan, severely damaging gas pipelines along the northern coast of the Sinai. The situation is similar along the Egyptian borders with Libya, a country that until now hasn't recovered from the uprising against its previous leader Moamar Al-Ghaddafi. The Al-Sisi administration did manage to restore the country's reputation in the West, but Egypt, now more than ever, is experiencing a *quasi* isolation on the ground from its immediate geostrategic setting, affecting financial prospects, based upon the country's natural gas resources off its Mediterranean coasts.

As geography has its own rules, Cyprus is once again important to Egypt. As an EU member-State, friendly to Israel, with historical ties to Egypt's position within the Arab world, sharing common endeavors in the regional energy market, the Republic of Cyprus can once again, be an important strategic ally to Egypt, providing direct access to the European markets. In the framework of this win-win situation, Cypriot natural gas resources are on the verge of playing a major role. On the political field, Egypt has already given clear signs of good will towards the Greek-Cypriot views on the Cyprus issue, by calling for the exclusion of the self-proclaimed 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' from the Islamic Conference of which it is currently monitoring. This move firmly expresses Cairo's anti-Turkish regional policy – a fact that Nicosia, under the present circumstances, cannot ignore.

On the other hand, the Republic of Cyprus has comprehended that Israel is reluctantly moving towards a practical –and not only verbal– cooperation in the fields of natural gas exploitation within the Cypriot EEZ, mainly due to Jerusalem's expectation that Turkish regional policy is about to change in favor of Israel, in view of a Western-led broad military coalition against the Islamic State. At the same time, Turkish-Israeli cooperation in the private sector is flourishing, despite the four-year-long diplomatic turbulences. As a result, and despite the frequency of common Cypriot-Israeli military exercises within the Cypriot territorial waters and airspace as well as Israeli FM's declarations, publicly backing Nicosia's argumentations over the Republic of Cyprus' exploration rights, Israel is avoiding to proceed with any practical move that would consolidate on the ground a long-lasting Cypriot-Israeli energy axis – a fact which might

endanger or even annihilate the prospect of a future rapprochement with Turkey, an important regional player for Israel's security concerns.

However, in case the recent talks between Egypt, Cyprus and Greece result in vital strategic partnership, Israel might reconsider its position. It may eventually decide to differentiate its energy projects with the Republic of Cyprus from its important security cooperation with Turkey, in case Ankara reevaluates its Middle Eastern policy.

No matter what the future holds for Israeli-Turkish relations, Israel's energy policy will always be related to its western sea borders with the Republic of Cyprus and the Cypriot EEZ. In case Nicosia and Cairo consolidate a cooperation on their energy projects, which would eventually include a strategic alignment with Greece, Israel might decide to become a part of a stable EU-backed energy exploitation environment, guaranteeing sustainable ties with Europe – a perspective boosting competitiveness in the energy market for both Egypt and Israel.