

## **A REGIONAL CYPRUS PROBLEM HOW A SOLUTION MAY AFFECT REGIONAL ENERGY AND SECURITY COOPERATION**

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*This article argues that, due to several developments that have taken place in the last few years in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and the greater Middle East, the Cyprus problem is now –to a large degree- a regional issue. By this, we mean that its existence –mostly its potential settlement- affects the interests of several regional actors, outside the traditional interested parties.*

### **“Cyprus joins the Middle East”**

In one of his articles on Cyprus titled “Cyprus Joins the Middle East”, Daniel Pipes, President of the Middle East Forum (a Philadelphia-based think tank), argued that

“The Republic of Cyprus has entered the maelstrom of the world's most volatile region, thanks to new-found gas and oil reserves combined with an erratic Turkish foreign policy and a civil war in Syria.”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Pipes is right in pointing out that Cyprus is no more absent from regional affairs, as it used to be. In the last few years, Cyprus is eventually becoming a -small but significant- regional player. Being a stable, democratic state and a credible regional partner to its neighbors, Cyprus developed harmonic relations and flourishing cooperation with almost every state in the region. Its rapidly developing cooperation with Israel and Egypt (in the form of two parallel tripartite partnerships, with the inclusion of Greece) in the fields of energy and security, could be interpreted as a game-changer in terms of regional power distribution.<sup>2</sup>

### **Cyprus on the energy map**

Mr. Pipes is also right in spotting the causes of Cyprus’ new regional role. First of all, significant natural gas findings have been confirmed in Aphrodite field (in plot 12 of the Cypriot exclusive economic zone [EEZ]). At the same time, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is in talks with companies and other regional governments in pursuit of the most profitable and secure way of transferring the gas to the markets. However, this undertaking faces Turkish reactions: Turkey disputed Cyprus’ sovereign rights by sending a research vessel –accompanied by warships- into the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pipes, “Cyprus Joins the Middle East,” November 6, 2013.

<http://www.danielpipes.org/13588/cyprus-oil-gas>, accessed on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Cropsey, “U.S. Policy and the Strategic Relationship of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel: Power Shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Hudson Institute*, March 2015.

Cypriot EEZ between October 2014 and April 2015, while trying to freeze Cyprus' research and exploitation plans. Both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot leadership argue that this issue should be discussed in the context of the ongoing Cyprus problem negotiations, and if the problem remains unresolved by the time the natural gas profits start to flow, these should be equally distributed to both sides in Cyprus.<sup>3</sup> The Cypriot government rejects this idea and declares that the Cypriot natural gas is owned by the RoC and that the Turkish Cypriots can benefit from natural gas sales only after a comprehensive solution of the Cyprus problem is achieved.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Ankara (which is currently an adversary to both Jerusalem and Cairo) believes that the efforts made by Cyprus, Israel and Egypt for shipping the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas in liquefied form essentially push Turkey aside. Ankara's strategic vision is to become "the leader in its region" in energy affairs.<sup>5</sup> According to Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Turkey will be the key country to ship these resources to international markets".<sup>6</sup>

### **Instability in the Middle East and Turkish aspirations**

Apart from energy, Cyprus' regional role is also highlighted by regional security imperatives and geopolitical concerns. The Hobbesian conflict taking place in Syria (only 70 miles away from Cyprus), which is actually a mosaic composed by multiple interlocking conflicts,<sup>7</sup> as well the alarming advance of the so called "Islamic State" are just pieces of the Middle East security puzzle. Another issue of paramount importance is the antagonism among the region's aspiring hegemon. Turkey is one of them. Ankara's quest for increased influence over Sunni populations,<sup>8</sup> along with its controversial approach towards the "Islamic State"<sup>9</sup> have alarmed both regional friends and foes. Relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel and Egypt have more or less deteriorated. This signifies the inglorious end of former Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's once ambitious

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian Croft, "Turkish Cypriot negotiator urges suspension of gas drilling," *Reuters*, January 27, 2015.

<http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/01/27/cyprus-talks-gas-idINL6N0V63WU20150127>, accessed on August 29, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "Leaders' meeting: solution first, and then natural gas for the Turkish Cypriots [Σύσκεψη αρχηγών: πρώτα λύση και μετά φυσικό αέριο για Τουρκοκύπριους]," *Phileleftheros*, November 18, 2014.

<http://www.philenews.com/el-gr/top-stories/885/228876/syskepsi-archigon-prota-lysi-kai-meta-fysiko-aerio-gia-tourkokyprious>, access on August 31, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Jörn Richert, "Is Turkey's Energy Leadership Over Before it Began?" *Istanbul Policy Center*, January 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Murat Tinas, "Erdogan opposes compromise on Turkey's position on gas resources in Cyprus," *Natural Gas Europe*, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/turkey-position-cyprus-gas-resources-23881>, accessed on August 29, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Syria's new diplomacy," *Jerusalem Post*, August 18, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/landedpages/printarticle.aspx?id=412099>, accessed on August 18, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Reva Bhalla, "The U.S.-Saudi Dilemma: Iran's Reshaping of Persian Gulf Politics," *Stratfor*, July 11, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Cropsey, "U.S. Policy and the Strategic Relationship of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel," 13.

“zero problems” policy.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Turkey’s commitment towards NATO and Western goals is widely disputed,<sup>11</sup> while the ruling AKP and Tayyip Erdoğan’s “mild Islamist” model has lost its initial charm.<sup>12</sup> Despite its undisputed geostrategic value (currently rising thanks to a US-led international campaign against the “Islamic State”), Turkey’s credibility is heavily questioned.

### **The Cyprus problem and regional energy and security cooperation**

Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East are linked with the ongoing Cyprus problem negotiations in several ways, especially in relation with regional energy and security cooperation. Assume for example that a future solution provides for the preservation (or slight modification) of the guaranteeing status established by the Treaty of Guarantee of 1960, as Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot leadership wish. In that context, the guarantor powers –supposedly Greece and Turkey– would be the main components of the island’s security structure and reserve the right to take military action (concerted or unilateral) whenever they believe that the state of affairs is threatened.<sup>13</sup> In that case –given Greece’s relative weakness due to its severe financial problems– Turkey would essentially be the main security provider in Cyprus. This scenario gives rise to several questions: will Greece’s relative weakness leave Turkish power unchecked? And, if so, will Turkey resist the temptation to use its guaranteeing status for reasons related with its own interests in Cyprus or the wider region? Assuming that reunified Cyprus lacks sufficient means of maritime and air defense (especially if the solution provides for demilitarization of the island), will Turkey be responsible for dealing with threats offshore Cyprus? How would Israel and Egypt react to such a settlement, especially in case their relations with Turkey remain strained after the solution is reached? In other words, are the rest of the regional actors ready to accept Turkey as a legitimate key holder of the Eastern Mediterranean’s energy and security cooperation?

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<sup>10</sup> Ilias I. Kouskouvelis, “The Problem with Turkey’s ‘Zero Problems’,” *Middle East Quarterly* 20 (2013): 47-56.

<sup>11</sup> Efreem Inbar, “Turkey-America’s Unacknowledged Problem,” BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 280, January 4, 2015. Emre Peker, “Turkey Breaks From West on Defense,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shifts-away-from-west-on-defense-1429608604>, accessed on August 31, 2015. Zachary Keck, “NATO Beware: Turkey May Buy Russia’s S-300 Air Defense System,” *The National Interest*, May 6, 2015. <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/nato-beware-turkey-may-buy-russias-s-300-air-defense-system-12822>, accessed on August 31, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Cropsey, “U.S. Policy and the Strategic Relationship of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel,” 6-8. Daron Acemoglu, “The Failed Autocrat,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 24, 2014. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/138488>, accessed on May 29, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Giorgos Kentas, “The Peculiar Concept of ‘Balance’ Between Turkey and Greece in Cyprus,” in *Great Power Politics in Cyprus: Foreign Interventions and Domestic Perceptions*, eds. Michalis Kontos, Sozos-Christos Theodoulou, Nikos Panayiotides, Haralambos Alexandrou (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 133-157.

### **The smaller, the better**

These questions have no certain answers since the details of a future solution are still uncertain. The situation in the greater Middle East might improve and relations between Turkey and its neighbors (especially Israel) might recover in the near future. Moreover, Turkey's recent decision to plunge into the fight against the "Islamic State" and allow US jets to use Turkish bases may improve Western perceptions of the Turkish foreign policy's orientation.<sup>14</sup> However, during Erdoğan era, Turkey became much more unpredictable and much less credible. Dealing with a powerful and unpredictable partner is usually full of unwanted surprises. On the other hand, while Mr. Erdoğan was ruining Turkey's traditional bonds in the region, Cyprus was building its own web of regional relationships, thus offering its neighbors a (much smaller but) much more credible partner. It's in almost every regional actor's interest to have a truly independent Cyprus after the solution of the Cyprus problem, with a real capacity of setting its own energy and security agendas. Should the Treaty of Guarantee remain in power after the solution, overhanging reunified Cyprus like the sword of Damocles, Cyprus would probably lose its regional player status at the expense of the whole region. Turkish dominance in the whole maritime area surrounding Cyprus would stimulate Ankara's hegemonic aspirations and hinder regional energy and security cooperation. In the Eastern Mediterranean basin, several actors may believe that a small and stable interlocutor like Cyprus is much better than a big and unpredictable one, like Turkey.

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<sup>14</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu, Helene Cooper, "U.S. Jets to Use Turkish Bases in War on ISIS," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2015.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/europe/turkey-isis-us-airstrikes-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/europe/turkey-isis-us-airstrikes-syria.html?_r=0), accessed on August 31, 2015.