

Reading into the Turkish behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean

Introduction

Over the past decades the international community has been dismayed and challenged by protracted conflicts among identity groups, defined in religious, ethnic, ideological, or cultural terms. The Cyprus conflict undoubtedly constitutes one of these cases. The 1963 bilateral clashes between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, along with the Turkish military invasion of the island and the occupation of 38% of the territory subsequent to a Greek coup d'état in the summer of 1974, have long left their imprint on the recent history of the island. Prolonged talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders, for 42 years, have failed to conclude a mutually agreed settlement leaving the country with the perspective for unification still distanced from reality and raising the specter of a possible permanent partition. 27 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Nicosia remains the only divided capital city across the world, with the southern (Republic of Cyprus- RoC) and northern (Turkish-Cypriot part) portions being divided by the "Green Line", a demilitarized zone, initially traced by the British troops in 1964 and maintained by the United Nations since then. The Greek-Cypriot administered RoC has been recognized by all UN members (except for Turkey) as a state entity representing the island as a whole, while the Turkish-Cypriot part has not been recognized by any UN member (except for Turkey).

If someone had to summarize that conflict in a few words, he would quote the deceased former President of the RoC, Glafkos Clerides' aphorism: "What satisfies their fears is what increases our fears, and so we have this paradoxical situation that unless we can find a way in which the fears of both communities are put at rest, it would be extremely difficult to find a solution to the Cyprus problem"¹. This phrase captures the very essence of the diachronic security dilemma concerning the island.

In the last five years, another development has added chill to the above described deadlock: the gas reserves detected off the southern side of the island. Due to their location in geological formations in ultra-deep waters, the gas reserves, for many years, had gone undiscovered in the Eastern Mediterranean. The technological equipment was either inadequate or extremely expensive in order to have them extracted and brought into the energy market. Nevertheless, in the dawn of the 21st century, technological advances and the then high oil international prices prompted oil and gas companies to explore new opportunities. In 2010, the US Geological Survey estimated a mean of 122 tcf (trillion cubic feet) in the Levant Basin. The Levant Basin is located along and off the coast of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and the Gaza Strip, extending westward into Cypriot waters (where 4 tcf have been detected so far). By global standards, the Levant Basin's gas resources are significant but not predominant. Russia for example, holds the world's largest natural gas reserves at 1,680 tcf, accounting for about 25% of global gas reserves. By Mediterranean standards, the Levant Basin's offshore natural gas

¹ Coughlan Reed (1991), 'Negotiating the Cyprus Problem: Leadership Perspectives from Both Sides of the Green Line', *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. 3(2), pp. 80-100, p. 91

reserves are sizeable, but they are less than the gas resources held by key North African producers, like Algeria².

RoC, having ratified the UNCLOS III in 1988³, signed agreements with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010) to delimitate its EEZ in the region. Afterwards, RoC divided its EEZ into 13 blocks and invited companies to initiate drilling activities in these blocks in 2011.

Both Turkey and Turkish Cypriots acted against these developments. After having signed a bilateral agreement on the delimitation of their “continental shelf”, they dispatched a Turkish seismic vessel, “Piri Reis”, accompanied by frigates and flight jets to escort it, in order to reassert their partnership over the sovereignty and the natural resources around the island. Three years later (November 2014) -after the Greek Cypriots had opened up a second round of licenses and launched new drilling activities- Turkish authorities issued a navigational warning in the region (NAVTEX) and dispatched another seismic vessel (“Barbaros”) for similar surveys. This evoked the reaction of the Greek Cypriots who decided to withdraw from the ongoing bilateral talks with the Turkish Cypriots. The tensions around the island drew the attention of the European press, which expressed its fears over the escalation of the situation into an armed conflict. After a series of threats, the Turkish officials terminated the NAVTEX while the Greek Cypriots stalled their drilling activities.

These incidents raise serious questions on Turkey’s role in the Eastern Mediterranean. How do these crises inform us on Turkey’s security concerns on the island? What are the main stimulants that prompted the Turkish course of action in these two cases in the way they did? What is the mélange of fears, interests and ideas at play?

The purpose of this paper is to figure out the stakes for Turkish foreign policy around the island of Cyprus. Although the official line adopted by the Turkish officials has been that the seismic vessel they dispatched at the Eastern Mediterranean aimed at the protection of the Turkish Cypriot rights on the natural resources of the island, the author assumes that the stakes for Turkey move beyond that. Economic calculations, fears and security considerations with respect to Turkey’s role in the region will be analyzed.

The discourses around the discoveries

The official position of the Greek Cypriots, who administer the RoC, has been that the wealth coming out of the exploitation of the gas would be distributed across the island in the aftermath of a solution. Nevertheless, the Turkish Cypriots reacted against the Greek Cypriot activities. The author visited the island and interviewed several officers and academicians to

² Paraschos Peter (2013) “Offshore Energy in the Levant Basin: Leaders, Laggards, and Spoilers” in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 24(1), pp. 38-56

³ In 1982 more than 60 countries signed the International Sea Law Convention (UNCLOS III). UNCLOS III divides the marine space that is within the limits of national jurisdiction into several zones: the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles), the contiguous zones (up to an additional 12 nautical miles), the Exclusive Economic Zone (up to 200 nautical miles) and the continental shelf (up to 200 nautical miles or up to 350 nautical miles under certain conditions). Four countries, for their own different reasons, that had participated in the working procedures of this convention have not yet signed the treaty: USA, Venezuela, Turkey and Israel

grasp an understanding of their reaction. The main objection they raised vis-à-vis the Greek-Cypriots was that they were excluded by the decision-making procedure with respect to the exploration and the exploitation of the gas reserves (signing delimitation agreements with other countries and offering bid to companies to start the drilling activities). Their main discourse was that the Greek-Cypriots acted as if they were the sole owners of the island. They wanted to be part of the decision-making procedure even before a settlement on the Cyprus question being reached.

On the other side, having interviewed some of the Greek-Cypriot officials, their main answer was that the decision-making procedure, as clearly demonstrated by the international community, is a matter of sovereignty for the RoC that could not be put into question by any other party. Adding to this, they argued that the companies, operating there, could not stall their drilling activities by waiting a consensus to be reached by both sides. They stated that the companies would not wait forever. The exploration opportunities provided by other regions might attract their interest and leave the hydrocarbons around the island untouched.

Although the protection of the Turkish Cypriot rights could be a reason for Turkey to intervene, the author believes that there are other stakes that should be taken into consideration if someone wants to dig deeper into the Turkish course of action.

The energy needs of the Turkish economy

Turkey possesses a territorial area of 783,562 sq km, being –in territorial terms- the 37th biggest country in the world. It is positioned in a region covering the Middle East, Central Asia, Caucasus, the Balkans and the Black Sea, sharing borders with Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Greece.

For several decades the Turkish economy was characterized by a guided industrialisation based on import substituting protectionism. A decision by the Council of Ministers on January 24, 1980, to remove many of the foreign currency controls that came under the banner of “Regulations to Protect the Value of the Turkish Lira” contributed to a fundamental transformation of the Turkish economy. This decision aimed at changing the country’s economic strategy from import substitution industrialization to export led growth and embedded the national economy to the global market system⁴. Turkey is among the world’s developed countries and is defined by economists and political scientists as one of the world's newly industrialized countries, holding the world's 18th largest nominal GDP.

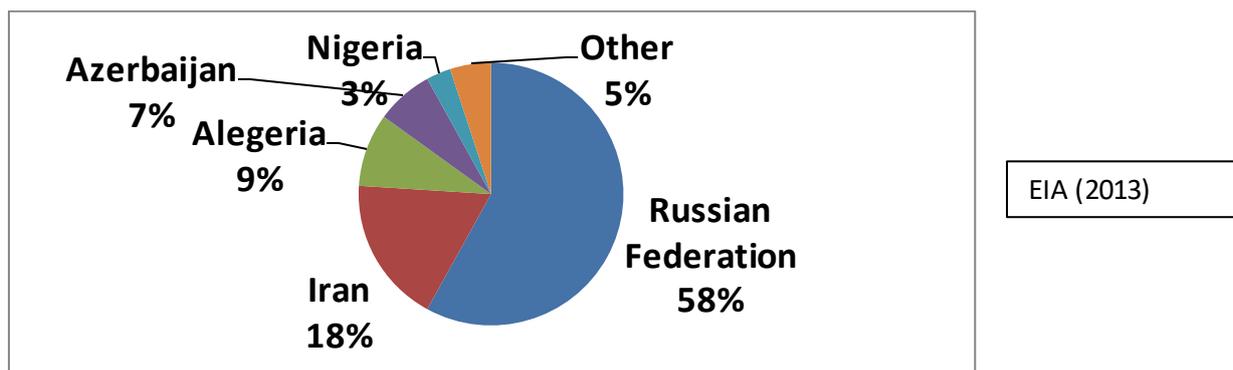
Nevertheless, this rapid development comes at a price. Turkey has increased its energy needs as its economy grows. The main energy fuel source it uses in order to cover its electricity, consumption, industry and transportation needs is natural gas, representing 35% of the country’s energy mix⁵. Turkey’s “rush to gas” occurred in the past decade, as the country’s

⁴ Turan Ilter (2015) “Reorienting Turkish Foreign Policy: Successes, Failures, Limitations” in Litsas Spyridon and Tziampiris Aristotle (eds.) *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, Dorchester UK: Ashgate, pp. 133-145, p. 135

⁵ “BP Statistical Review of World Energy” <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/energy-economics/statistical-review-2015/bp-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2015-full-report.pdf>

demand tripled from 15 bn cubic meters (bcm) annually in 2000 to 47.6 bcm in 2013, registering the first biggest increase in the world demand after China.

What makes things problematic from an energy security standpoint is Turkey's asymmetric reliance on a single supplier, Russia.⁶ The following chart demonstrates this uneven distribution. Russia's belligerence in Turkey's neighborhood over the past seven years (invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, the 2015 incident when Turkish authorities shut down a Russian helicopter in the Syrian-Turkish border) have stressed the emergency for Turkey to diversify its energy suppliers and supply routes.



Located between the world's second largest natural gas consumer after the US, Europe, and major natural gas reserves in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey conceives itself as a transit state for the transportation of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea and the Middle East to Europe in order to meet EU's energy needs. To this effect, several gas pipeline projects are moving forward to help transport Caspian gas to Europe through Turkey, which in the long run will enable Turkey to address its dependence on imported oil and gas.

Turkey aspires to play the same role in the Eastern Mediterranean. It entertains the possibilities to export Israeli gas from the Leviathan field to Europe. In March 2014, two Turkish companies, Zorlu Group and Turcas Holding, participated in a tender for the possible laying of a 7-10 bcm/y capacity pipeline across the Eastern Mediterranean connecting Leviathan to the Turkish mainland⁷.

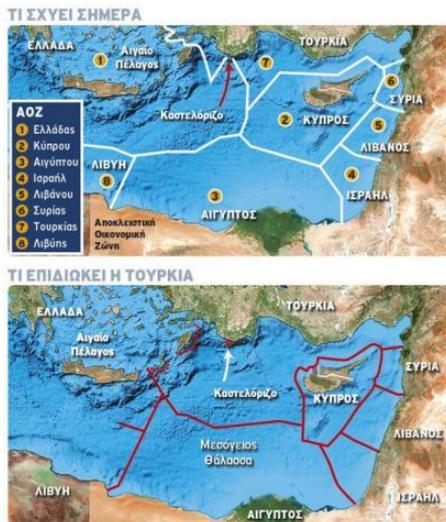
⁶ Emre Tuncalp (2015) "Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy: Balancing Geopolitical Goals & Market Realities" in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 14(3), pp. 67-79, p. 69

⁷ Barket Amiram (23.3.2014) "10 bids for Leviathan export tender to Turkey" in *Globes* <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-10-bids-for-leviathan-export-tender-to-turkey-1000926526> (Accessed in 28.1.2016)



Map 1
 Turkey-Israel Energy
 Corridor
 Source: Oilprice.com

Nevertheless, in order to fulfill these prospects and to avoid the turbulent Syrian waters, this pipeline should cross the EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey has not recognized the Republic of Cyprus as a state entity under its current status, since Turkish Cypriots are not part of the administration. The delimitation agreements of the Republic of Cyprus, its continuous cooperation with Israel, Egypt and Greece, as well as the drilling activities of several companies might establish *faits accomplis* in the region that Turkey’s interests could comply with. Moreover, as the following picture shows, the possibility for the Greek authorities to declare an EEZ for the tiny island-complex, Kastellorizo, assigning to it the sovereign rights that derive from UNCLOS III, would transform an important proportion of Eastern Mediterranean waters from international into sovereign zones; furthermore, that these sovereign zones would be under the aegis of states considered by Turkey as “hostile” to its security (Greece and the Republic of Cyprus). Thus, the room for Turkey to have an important say in the region would be further constrained.



The island of Cyprus in Turkey’s strategic calculations: a source of existential threat and indispensable element of Turkey’s national security

There is an additional concern for Turkey. Cyprus possesses a central position in global politics since it is located at the juncture of Eurasia with Africa. Turkey is the closest neighbor at 50 miles north of the island, while Syria and Lebanon are approximately 70 miles to its eastern side. Other neighboring territories include Egypt in the south (240 miles) and Israel to the southeast (124 miles). In the westward direction, the nearest Greek Dodecanesian island, Kastellorizo is 170 miles away while the latter’s distance from the Greek mainland is close to

500 miles. Quoting the current Turkish Prime Minister, “this island stands in a position that could directly influence the strategic links between Asia and Africa, Europe and Africa, Europe and Asia. Cyprus, thanks to its eastern coast, is parallel to an arrow oriented towards the Middle East, while, thanks to its western coast, constitutes the cornerstone upon which the strategic balances within the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and Northern Africa have been constructed”⁸.

The foreign policy and security establishment in Turkey has always laid emphasis on the geo-strategically vital status of Cyprus for the country’s defense and security⁹. “Stuck in its southern underbelly, Cyprus is a major concern for Turkey” and “it is the final, southern element in the containment of Turkey”¹⁰. The island, which has a strategic position to “control the important Turkish harbors of Iskenderun and Mersin”¹¹, can easily be utilized by a hostile power as a springboard for the conquest of Anatolia from the south”¹². This rationale is based on the presumption that “an unfriendly power lodged in Cyprus could easily strike the nation’s Anatolian heartland”¹³. From the military and strategic perspective, any state dominant on the island would have a say in the ‘fate of Turkey’, since ‘if this dominant is also the same power on the islands to the west, Turkey would be *de facto* encircled’¹⁴. The term “unfriendly power” indicates Greece. Cyprus has been imagined as the ‘cornerstone of Greece’s policy of enveloping Turkey with a strategic belt of hostile states’¹⁵. Thus, the island has been framed here as a source of existential threat that entails the fear of encirclement.

Furthermore, there is an additional discourse in the Turkish strategic calculations that should be taken into consideration. Turan Gunes, Turkey’s foreign minister in the Ecevit cabinet during Turkey’s military operations in July-August 1974 in Cyprus, has made the following statement: “Cyprus is as precious as the right arm of a country which cares for her defense or her expansionistic aims if she harbors any. If we don’t keep this strategic importance of Cyprus we cannot understand the peace operation¹⁶ of 20 July 1974 or rather it is impossible to understand the entire Cyprus crisis”. He added also that “many states, to a certain extent because it suits their interest, want to see the Cyprus problem merely as our desire to protect the Turkish community on the island; whereas the actual problem is the security of 45 million Turks in motherland together with Turks in the island and the maintenance of the balance of

⁸ Davutoglu Ahmet (2001) *Stratejik Derinlik: Turkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic Profoundness: Turkey’s International Position]. Istanbul: Küre Yayınları

⁹ Kaliber Alper (2005) “Securing the Ground through securitized ‘Foreign Policy’: The Cyprus case” in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 36(3), pp. 319-337, p.324-325

¹⁰ Olgun, Mustafa Ergün, 1999. “Turkey’s Tough Neighborhood: Security Dimension of the Cyprus Conflict”, in Clement H. Dodd, ed., *Cyprus: The Need for New Perspectives* Cambridgeshire: Eothen (231–260), p. 232

¹¹ Located in the Mediterranean part of Turkey

¹² Kazan, Ismail, (2002) ‘Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, Seen from Turkey’, in Thomas Diez, ed., *The European Union and the Cyprus Conflict: Modern Conflict Postmodern Union*. New York: Manchester University Press (54–69), p. 58

¹³ Ismail Sabahattin (1989) *20th July Peace Operation: Reasons, Development and Consequences*, Istanbul: Kastas, p. 137

¹⁴ These words belong to the former Turkish Prime Minister F. Rustu Zorlu as quoted in Kazan 2002: 58

¹⁵ Olgun 1999: 231-232 & Kaliber 2005: 325

¹⁶ This is how the Turkish authorities have called the military intervention in the summer of 1974. Several Security Council resolutions have condemned this intervention.

the Middle East”¹⁷. This presentation of Cyprus as an indispensable element of Turkey’s national security resonates with the aphorism of Davutoglu: “even if no Muslim Turk had been there, it would be required for Turkey to maintain a Cyprus question”¹⁸.

Conclusions

All these lead to the conclusion that protecting the rights of the Turkish Cypriots cannot be the only variable to explain the Turkish attitude in the region. Focusing, though, on this variable, the readers cannot see the forest for the trees. There are other considerations, fears and ideas that should be also placed into the equation, if we really want to gain a deep insight into the Turkish calculations in the region.

¹⁷ Kaliber 2005:326 and *Hürriyet* (20.7.1980) translated into English and quoted at <http://www.hellas.org/cyprus/trexpand.htm>

¹⁸ Davutoglu 2001:177