



Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:
Trends in the Eastern Mediterranean
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Trends in the Eastern Mediterranean

Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean reflect traditional tensions between Greece and Turkey. In May, a new dispute entered the agenda as Athens and Ankara disagreed over the construction of part of the Evros border. Greece is largely relying on its cooperation with its partners to support its position in the region while Turkey employs a muscular approach. The potential warming-up of ties between Turkey and Israel deserves particular attention, although it lacks the potential of undermining the excellent level of cooperation between Greece and Israel which are celebrating thirty years since the establishment of diplomatic relations.

While April 2020 was relatively calm for bilateral Greek-Turkish relations because of the fight against novel coronavirus, May reminds us of previous tensions. In parallel with typical violations of Greek airspace by Turkish fighters, a new theme dominates the agenda. This is the Greek-Turkish dispute over a small area in Melissokomeio, located in the southern part of the Evros River. While Greece is building there a fence to prevent the arrival of irregular immigrants, Turkish police forces have attempted to block the preparation work. Greece thus decided to lodge a demarche to Turkey in which it cites specific maps which affirm this preparation work has taken place on Greek territory. But Turkey seems to have claimed an area of approximately 1.6 hectares and allegedly occupy them according to the British tabloid *The Sun*. The Greek government refutes the claim that Turkish forces entered Greek soil. It considers the dissemination of stories about the presence of a foreign power on Greek territory as fake news, expressing self-confidence it knows how to defend the borders of Greece and Europe.

The relevant comment of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has complicated matters. Specifically, on 23 May Spokesperson Hami Aksoy said that the construction of the fence should not have been commenced without technical coordination between the two countries as the riverbed of the Evros River which delineates the Turkish-Greek land border in 1926 has changed significantly because of natural and artificial factors. Therefore, Aksoy asserts, no mutually-agreed geographical coordinates of this particular section of the border exists that are compatible to 1926 agreement. From the moment, he explains, Greece ‘violated’ the contractual land border, Turkish authorities intercepted the ‘violation’ by taking necessary

measures. According to the Turkish position, technical delegations can solve the issue. Ambassador of Turkey to Greece Burak Ozugergin only considers the theme ‘technical’.

On 24 May, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias gave an interview on SKAI TV in which he attempted to explain what has happened. As he said, Greece refused to respond to a Turkish request to be notified in advance about the geographical coordinates of the constructed fence because the work was taking place on Greek territory. In the same interview, Dendias decided to politicize the issue suggesting that the Greek main opposition SYRIZA should not have criticized the government without first proceeding to fact-checking. One day before, the Greek Ministry of Defense had clarified that there was never an occupation of Greek territory by foreign forces and asserted that the Greek armed forces have always been and will always be present in the area, fully executing their mission.

Even if the new Greek-Turkish disagreement about the construction of the Evros River fence is only ‘technical’, it is obvious that bilateral relations are being continuously strained. On 11 May, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates condemned the escalation of Turkey’s violations of the Greek national airspace, including over flights of inhabited areas and territorial waters in violation of international law as well as the instrumentalization of civilians by Ankara in an attempt to illegally cross Greek land borders as well as its continued support for illegal crossings of Greek sea boundaries. On the very same day, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered the joint declaration of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates as a case in point of the hypocrisy of a group of countries who were seeking regional chaos and instability through the policies they were pursuing.

Four days later, on 15 May the EU Foreign Affairs Council reiterated its respect for the sovereignty and sovereign rights of all states in their maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean on the basis of international law and the provisions of the UN convention on the law of the sea. In the view of Nikos Dendias, this was an ‘evident act of solidarity’. But the subsequent response of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was rather ironic. According to the relevant statement it was noteworthy that the solidarity, which the EU had failed ‘to demonstrate in the fight against COVID-19, is now rendered unconditionally when it is the Greek Cypriots in question’. Ankara also encouraged the EU to proceed with common sense while taking international law into consideration ‘instead of acting blindly as the mouthpiece of Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration under a pretext of solidarity.’

While Greece and Turkey tend to seriously disagree on several themes, the general context in the Eastern Mediterranean needs to be taken into account. In May Greece and Israel are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. It was in 1990 when Prime Minister Constantinos Mitsotakis had decided to recognize de jure Israel. Amid celebrations, some media reports anticipate a rewarming in Turkish-Israeli ties. Roey Gilad, charge d'affaires in the Embassy of Israel in Turkey wrote an article in Halimis titled: 'Turkey-Israel: common interests between Idlib and COVID-19. In this piece he elaborates on areas of cooperation between the two countries. The potential rewarming of ties raises the question whether Greek-Israel relations and the tripartite scheme of Greece-Israel-Cyprus will be impacted. The theme is expected to generate a lively debate in the public discourse.

Israel and Turkey have entered a period of normalization in their relations since 2016. They tend to agree on some issues such as the need of a higher trade volume and closer economic collaboration and disagree on others such as the Palestinian Question or Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The article written by Roey Gilad offers a new dimension in the bilateral cooperation which includes the joint effort against the novel coronavirus and a common concern about Iranian actions in Syria. In practice, nothing changes as the normalization process has been ongoing for years. Having said that the tripartite scheme of Greece-Israel-Cyprus is not directly affected. It is fair for both Israel and Turkey to look for practical ways of cooperation. But this will hardly lead the Israeli government to jeopardize what has been already achieved in its relations between Greece and Cyprus. It will rather employ a smart, multidimensional foreign policy approach.

Turkey has been involved in two civil wars in the Mediterranean. In Libya it supports the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Chairman Fayeze al-Sarraj. But in Syria it strongly disagrees with the actions of President Bashar al Assad, who appears to be close with General Khalifa Haftar, al-Sarraj's rival in Libya. For its part, Greece supports Haftar in the Libyan civil war and recently announced its decision to appoint Ambassador Tasia Athanasiou a special envoy for Syria. Her mandate includes contacts concerning international aspects of the Syrian crisis and related humanitarian actions, as well as coordination of actions in view of the efforts towards the reconstruction of the country. Obviously, Greece's role remains diplomatic whereas the one of Turkey military. But the two countries take a different position in Libya and this could perhaps be also the case in Syria should Athens decide to reestablish ties with Damascus which appears to be critical of Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. For its part, the US prefer to keep equal distances from Greece and Turkey, discreetly supporting the latter. It is worth-mentioning that on 15 May the spokesman of the Greek

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexandros Yennimatas said that the content of an interview given by the Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg about Libya in an Italian newspaper did not express the Alliance's position. In this interview, Stoltenberg allegedly expressed NATO's support for al-Sarraj's government.

Conclusion

Following a few weeks of fight against the novel coronavirus, tensions between Greece and Turkey are coming back to the foreign policy agenda. But this theme goes beyond the bilateral scope. While Greece, Israel and Cyprus are expanding their cooperation, the possibility of the beginning of a new, more constructive phase in the Israeli-Turkish partnership is being publicly discussed. Israel is not prepared to endanger significant benefits of its collaboration with Greece and Cyprus and will be perhaps interested in combining both options. Additionally, the evolution of the civil wars in Syria and Libya will be critical not only for regional stability but also for Greek-Turkish relations as Athens and Ankara are taking different sides – at least in Libya – and are shaping their foreign policies accordingly.