



The Eastern Mediterranean Energy Resources and Redetermination of Regional Balances: Türkiye's Position

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Abstract

The Eastern Mediterranean energy resources are incredibly significant for the states in the region as these reserves are vital to ensure their energy security and promote economic development. Geographically bordering the region, Türkiye, Israel, Egypt, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCA), Greece, Lebanon, Syria and Libya follow active policies in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, countries such as the USA, Russia, England, France and Italy try to take their position in the energy equation in the Eastern Mediterranean, although they do not have a border with the region. In this context, the world's largest energy companies focused on the region and compete with each other for a share in the energy exploration and pipeline projects there. In the Eastern Mediterranean region, which can be compared to a multivariate equation, many problems, crises and cooperation opportunities coexist due to the geopolitics of it. Europe's intensifying energy crisis followed by the Russian-Ukrainian war added a new dimension to the current situation in the region. It seems that the energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean will redetermine the balance of power in the regions. Using literature review as a research methodology, the aim of this paper is to analyze Türkiye's position in the process of redistribution of cards in the region. The data will be collected using various methods, including a review of the academic studies, public documents and statistics, interviews and official declarations of the authorities.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, energy resources, energy security, Türkiye

1. Introduction

The strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean, which has always been of interest to the great powers with its political, military, and commercial potential, has continued to increase in every period of history. The Eastern Mediterranean has never lost its geo-economic and geopolitical importance as it has been one of the important centres of world trade, having hydrocarbon resources and paving the way for Middle East domination. Therefore, many important wars, which can be considered as turning points in history, took place with the idea of dominating this geography.

At the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean region is one of the special geographies where different civilizations coexist. Although the diversity has enriched the region's nature for centuries, it has also laid the foundation of many problems. In addition to all its geostrategic importance, the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the most sensitive areas open to hot conflict at any moment.

The process that started in North Africa and the Middle East and defined as the "Arab Spring" is closely related to the Eastern Mediterranean. Located at the intersection of these two regions, the Eastern Mediterranean is at the strategic

focal point of the mentioned change and transformation process.

Today, the Eastern Mediterranean is full of conflicting national interests and priorities of the littoral states. The conflicting maritime jurisdiction claims of the littoral states, the Cyprus issue, the problems in the Middle East, the Syrian war and the energy struggle destabilize the region sufficiently. The ongoing dispute over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has engendered an alarming rise in political tensions on a regional and international level. The anticipated strategic and economic gains associated with the potential of significant energy reserves in the region has not only drawn in regional players such as Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus and Lebanon, but also international powers including the United States, the European Union, China and Russia. As exploration tenders are acquired by large multi-national energy giants, stakeholder countries continue to engage in efforts to ensure a fair distribution of the region's resource potential (Belladonna, 2019).

Türkiye, as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, is the country with the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean. Coastal states gained their independence in the 19th and 20th centuries through secession from the Ottoman Empire. However, Türkiye is still one of the most active countries in the region.

Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean policy is influenced by four basic factors: historical, political, economic and security dimensions. Due to the fact that the region was under the control of the Ottoman Empire for many years, today Türkiye has a historical bond with the peoples of the region, shaped on cultural and religious grounds mainly. The effects of having a common past under the roof of the Ottoman Empire manifest themselves in the customs and traditions of other littoral countries, in their state and army systems. Due to the nature of the contemporary international system, Türkiye's political, economic and security interests in the region are intertwined today. Türkiye's energy dependence and the presence of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean - right next to it - added a new dimension to the current situation.

In this study, Türkiye's approach with the addition of the energy dimension to its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean is discussed. In this context, in the first part of the study, the general outlook of the Eastern Mediterranean region was outlined. In the second part, the major foundations of Türkiye's presence in the region and how the energy resources and the balance in the region will be reshaped were discussed. The study is concluded with the conclusion part.

2. Geopolitics of The Eastern Mediterranean Region

The "Eastern Mediterranean" is defined differently by geographers, policy-makers and experts. The term "Eastern Mediterranean" was often used interchangeably with that of "Middle East (Mallinson, 2005).

This is to say that, despite the name of the Eastern Mediterranean being used, the concept was quite different to that of today. The Eastern Mediterranean was seen as a strategic space, not so much because of its own geopolitical or geo-economic importance as such but because of its role in allowing the pursuit of greater strategic interests in the Middle East and beyond. In other words, it was an area that needed to be secured or controlled in order for something more important to be achieved (Tziarras, 2018).

However, the Eastern Mediterranean is represented by the eastern portion of the Mediterranean Sea basin. The Eastern Mediterranean includes:

- The Adriatic Sea, northwest of the main body of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, separates the Italian peninsula from the Balkan peninsula and extends from the Strait of Otranto to the south (where it connects to the Ionian Sea) to the Gulf of Venice in the north.
- The Ionian Sea lying between Albania (northeast), Greece (east), Sicily (southwest), and Italy (west and northwest) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022a).
- The Aegean Sea, located between the Greek and the Anatolian peninsulas, with the island of Crete defining its southern border (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022b).
- The Levantine Sea is separated from the Ionian Sea by a submarine ridge between the western end of Crete and Cyrenaica (Libya) and extends to the south of the Anatolia peninsula. It is bordered by Türkiye in the north, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Gaza Strip in the east, Egypt and Libya in the south, and the Aegean Sea in the northwest. The west borders the open Mediterranean (also called the Libyan Sea) and is defined as a line from the cape Ra's al-Hilal in Libya to the island of Gavdos, south of Crete (European Commission, 2022).

Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCA), Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina (with coasts on the Adriatic Sea) and Türkiye, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

(TRNC), Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Gaza Strip, Egypt, Libya (with coasts on the Aegean and/or Levantine Seas) have coasts on the Eastern Mediterranean (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Eastern Mediterranean
Source: UN Geospatial, 2020.

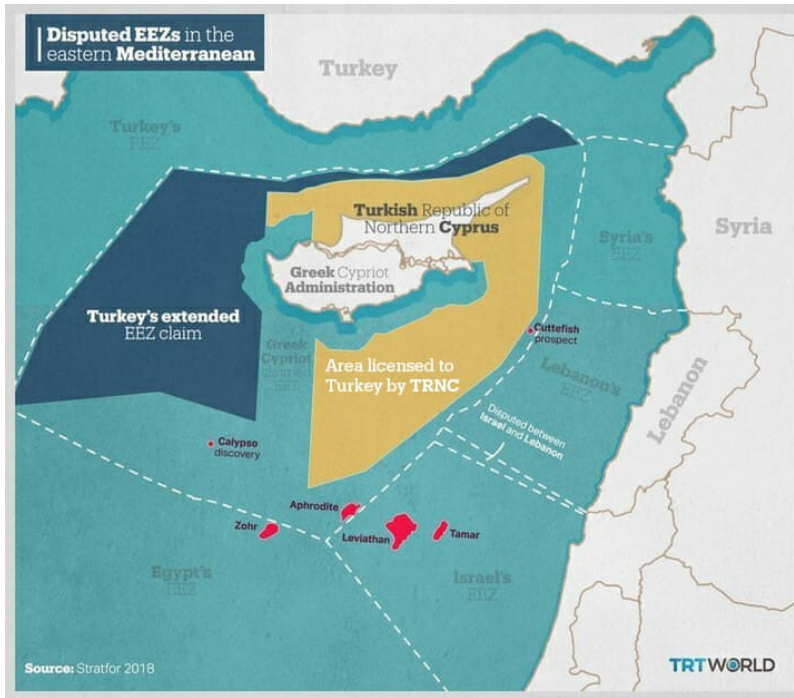
Located at the crossroads between Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean region serves as a critical transit route of global trade, connecting the East to the West, the Atlantic Ocean, the Black sea, and the Red Sea. Considering the geostrategic importance of each of the mentioned geographies separately, the multidimensional significance of the Eastern Mediterranean region is clearly appeared. The intense activity volume of the trade routes shortened by the Suez Canal further increased the geostrategic importance of the region. The Eastern Mediterranean as a region is not a new notion. In addition to its geographical location, the fact that it is home to different civilizations not only diversifies the values of the region, but also brings with the conflicts among values. In every period of history, one of the first goals of empires and states has been to dominate especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The region still bears the traces from the times of Alexander the Great, the Roman, the Persian and the Ottoman empires, and today it is the scene of the struggle of the powers acting as the heirs of these empires (Tugrul, 2018:15).

The area is one of the oldest regions of human habitation. The region possess special meaning for the history of religion. Location of the Eastern Mediterranean region at the intersection of three continents has also deeply affected its identity structure. The fact that the region has different civilizations, religious and ethnic identities forms the basis of various conflicts here. The Cyprus issue and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which have been waiting for a solution for many years, are just two of the such problems in the region.

One of the most important disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean is about the law of the sea. 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea recognizes the right of the coastal state to declare an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in its territorial waters and beyond. On the other hand, Article 74 of 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea states that the delimitation of the EEZ between states with adjacent or opposite coasts should be made by treaty in accordance with international law, as specified in Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in order to reach an equitable solution (UN, 1982:52; ICJ, 1945). In order to provide a fair solution on behalf of all parties, Convention and international judicial decisions refer to "an agreement to be reached between all parties concerned". However, there is no regulation stating that the EEZ cannot be declared unilaterally. For historical and political reasons, most of the countries involved do not have maritime delimitation agreements, making it thus extremely difficult to find an appropriate settlement

for the exploitation of gas reserves in border areas (Belladonna, 2019). Due to the lack of consensus among them, the states in the Eastern Mediterranean declared their EEZ unilaterally and preferred to make bilateral agreements rather than agreements with all littorals (Picture 2).



Picture 2. Disputed EEZs In The Eastern Mediterranean

Source: TRT World, 2020.

These problems have made regional integration and cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean almost impossible for a long time.

Today, the facts that the Eastern Mediterranean region covers 30 per cent of the world's total maritime trade, approximately 25 per cent of the oil trade by sea takes place through this region, and the hydrocarbon reserves it hosts, unfortunately, have made the region the heart of conflicts. More than 3 trillion cubic meters of available energy reserves have been discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean in the last decade alone. This amount is expected to increase with new fields expected to be discovered in the forthcoming years (Erdogan, 2022).

The transformation of the region into a field of struggle of the great powers due to its geostrategic importance, identity-based conflicts, disagreements between littoral states in terms of maritime law, the Cyprus issue, the Israel-Palestine conflict and more make the region extremely sensitive. Although newly discovered energy sources add a new dimension to this turmoil, it also created an opportunity for the regional cooperation.

Thus, the Eastern Mediterranean is an important geography not only in terms of the struggle for regional and global supremacy, but also in terms of contributing to peace and stability.

3. Turkiye's Theses in the Eastern Mediterranean

The Turkish domination in the Mediterranean began with the Battle of Preveza, which took place in 1538 and ended with the victory of the Ottoman Empire. Turkiye's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region is based on multidimensional foundations. The first of these is its geographical location, which also raises security issues. Turkiye is the country with the longest coast in the Eastern Mediterranean with a coastal line of 1870 kilometres along the Mediterranean Sea. Such

a long coastal line makes the Mediterranean vital not only for Türkiye's maritime security but also for mainland security. In fact, the most threatening attempt on the mainland of the Turkish soil during World War I was the huge landing operation, from sea to land, on the Canakkale Strait (Publications by Presidency's Directorate of Communication, 2022:119). Thus, developments in the wider Eastern Mediterranean are of great interest to Türkiye, both because of its current historical, cultural and social ties with the peoples of the region and because of the direct or indirect impact of these developments on Türkiye. For all the above reasons, the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the areas where the interests of both the countries of the region and the powers outside the region clash. The discovery of rich energy sources has set in motion a process to restore the balances here (Table 1). It is predicted that 3.45 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil are found in the Leviathan Basin Aphrodite field located between Palestine/Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Syria. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.8 billion barrels of oil, 6.3 trillion cubic meters natural gas, and 6 billion barrels of liquid natural gas reserves in the Nile Delta Basin. It is estimated that there are 8 billion barrels of oil reserves around the island of Cyprus and there is a total of 3.5 trillion cubic meters of natural gas in the region around the island of Cyprus and the region called Heredot in the southeast of Crete Island. It is estimated that the total energy reserve of the Eastern Mediterranean is equal to approximately 30 billion barrels of oil (Publications by Presidency's Directorate of Communication, 2022:110).

Table 1. Oil and Natural Gas Reserves In Selected Countries In The Eastern Mediterranean

Country	Million barrels of oil reserves	Natural gas reserves in trillion cubic feet
Egypt	3,300	63,30
Greece	10	0,04
Israel	13	6,22
Jordan	1	0,21
Türkiye	371	0,11

Source: *Oil & Gas Journal*, 2021.

With energy imports accounting for 70 per cent of consumption, with 93 per cent of oil and 99 per cent of gas coming from imports, Türkiye, has spent in the last decade an average of 40 billion dollars every year to import energy (Belladonna, 2019). This reflected on Türkiye as current deficit. Any agreement in the Eastern Mediterranean that would contradict Türkiye's interests will set a precedent for the Aegean problems that have been waiting for a solution for many years.

The Cyprus issue, which has been waiting to be resolved for half a century, undoubtedly constitutes one of the focal points of the issues regarding the Eastern Mediterranean. The GCA's EU membership in 2004 in spite of the unresolved political division of Cyprus between the TRNC and the GCA is one of the important factors in this sense.

The GCA's unilateral gas extraction operations in the region have escalated tensions with Türkiye. Political tensions between Türkiye-Israel and Türkiye-the GCA hinder the realization of the gas exploitation projects.

The struggle for regional and global influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, namely, the front yard of Türkiye, experienced due to its coastal length of 1,870 kilometres, is a serious factor affecting Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean strategy. Besides the states of the region, a great many of states from outside the region and remote regions are involved in the struggle. That is why, surely, it is unimaginable for Türkiye to remain silent to the interventions occurring in the Eastern Mediterranean region before the eyes of the whole world over the last decade (Publications by Presidency's Directorate of Communication, 2022).

During the period under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, peace and stability prevailed in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. As the Ottoman Empire's control weakened in these regions, conflicts and wars began here. Based on the principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world" by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye, the Turkish government does not act only according to short-term economic interests in the region today. As long as there is a division between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots in the region, as long as the rights of Palestinians are ignored, a policy based on daily economic interests cannot be implemented and this is unacceptable for Türkiye. On the contrary, a rare opportunity for establishing a lasting peace in the region - discovery of rich energy resources – exists. It must be used to both ensure energy security by meeting the oil and gas needs of the littoral states as well as to gain economic development and to support the national budgets using energy incomes. But moreover, this unique opportunity such as the energy cooperation between the states of the Eastern Mediterranean must be used to establish peace and stability in the region, taking the advantage conditions arising from common need and to solve the problems between

them, producing the long term settlement based on a permanent ground.

At first, this policy that Türkiye seeks in the region may not seem realistic. On the other hand, the security threats faced by states, societies, and individuals confirm this thesis of Türkiye. Non-traditional security problems - natural disasters, pandemics, climate change and environmental problems, earthquakes - show that security is shifting from an individual or national level to a global and societal level that affects everyone. Globalization and the aged world are forcing states and societies to think about and focus on global security. In this context, Turkish policy in the Eastern Mediterranean serves regional and global peace and cooperation by acting out of national interests.

4. Conclusion

Because of its geographic location and strategic importance, the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the few regions that both shapes and is shaped by world politics. The Eastern Mediterranean is also the region where civilizations both meet and clash. Therefore, any development in the Eastern Mediterranean affects world politics simultaneously at the global, regional and local levels. The rich fossil energy resources discovered here are capable of redefining local, regional and global balances in this sense. Natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have transformed the region's energy market and economic relationships, raising hopes for geopolitical change as well (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Eastern Mediterranean energy resources are incredibly significant for the states in the region as these reserves are vital to ensure their energy security and promote economic development, promising peace and stability on the common ground.

Türkiye is one of the oldest and most active players in the region. Any development in the Eastern Mediterranean – whether it is political, economic, social, religious, cultural, or security-related – directly concerns and affects Türkiye. In addition to history, geography, and social factors, the foreign policy preferences of political elites and the geopolitical structure of the region are the most important factors influencing Türkiye's regional policy here. In addition to all these factors, and in some ways closely related to them, another point is Türkiye's connection to the West. Türkiye's connection to the West has long influenced its relations with the other Eastern Mediterranean states, both positively and negatively, and from different perspectives.

Türkiye is a country that has experienced the Western standards in its process of joining the EU. Its geographical proximity makes it an ideal location for pipeline projects. With the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, TANAP and TAP pipeline projects, it has proven to be an economic and reliable partner and a secure energy hub.

The Eastern Mediterranean is essential not only for the countries in the region, but also for the EU countries, which face a serious energy security problem in their relations with Russia. Russia uses its natural gas as a pressure tool in its foreign policy that has been more visible in the axis of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In this environment, therefore, Türkiye's theses are based on realistic grounds.

Thus, Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean policy is built upon two major foundations. The first is the protection of its sovereign rights in own continental shelf by delimiting maritime jurisdictions in accordance with international law in a just and fair manner. The second is to guarantee the rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriots on hydrocarbon reserves as an equal partner of the island. These two principles are both totally legitimate and in compliance with the international law, serving regional and global peace.

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