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## **What are the main risks that the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean pose for the EU and wider Europe?**

*The conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean are more than a regional struggle between Greece and Cyprus on the one side and Turkey on the other. Experts from the CATS Network and other institutions responded to our question.*

### **Michaël Tanchum, University of Navarra, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), Vienna**

The Eastern Mediterranean conflicts have eroded the coherence of the EU system and hobbled the Union's ability to set the agenda for relations across its southern borders. Beyond a catastrophic Turkey-Greece military clash, the continuing status quo poses intolerable risks for the Union. The EU system's relations with Turkey and with its own Mediterranean members are now primarily defined by Europe's continued inability to act in a coordinated manner to achieve a strategic impact. Europe's delivery deficit in the Eastern Mediterranean renders the EU a house dangerously divided, entrenching the fault lines among the EU's six Mediterranean members – Greece, Cyprus, France, Italy, Spain and Malta. Each state is prioritising strategic partnerships outside the EU framework to secure its interests. Greece's mobilisation of an unprecedented level of military support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel is only the most recent example. Turkey, acting as guardian of Turkish Cypriot rights in the northern part of ethnically divided Cyprus, now insists the EU member nation itself be partitioned to create an independent Turkic state. The EU's ongoing Eastern Mediterranean delivery deficit opens further opportunities for China, Russia, Turkey, Egypt and the GCC states to shape the regional architecture in ways that neither represent European values nor serve Europe's interests.

### **Karol Wasilewski, The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Warsaw**

I prefer to look at the issue through the broader prism of the key term 'political cohesion'. Firstly, irregular migration, fuelled also by regional confrontations and instability, gives fuel to populists who incite fear in societies and promise simple yet unrealistic solutions. This not only threatens the European integration project, but also seriously impedes rational decision making aiming at resolving problems for the EU stemming from this subregion. Secondly, the conflicts in the East-Med divide the EU countries in terms of what approach to take; what instruments to use; what partners the EU should cooperate with; what should be the extent of such cooperation; or even how much attention should be paid to the issues of the

subregion in comparison to other challenges (like, for example, the situation in Belarus). This results in a limited effectiveness of the EU's policy towards the subregion and strengthens the influence of other powers – be it adversarial players like Russia, or those who seem to have an 'adversarial partner' status like Turkey. An additional problem arises when the tensions around the East-Med move to the NATO forum thus harming the effectiveness of the most important institution for Europe's security.

**Panagiotis Tsakonas, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Athens**

The stability of the EU and the wider Europe is indeed linked to the stability of the Eastern Mediterranean. It is not by coincidence that the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has stressed that 'it is clear that the European Union will not be able to achieve stability in the continent unless it finds the right balance in its relations with Turkey'.

Unfortunately, by adopting an assertive stance, which is translated into the same pattern of aggressive behaviour in Cyprus and the Aegean as in Syria, Libya and Iraq, Turkey has become a revisionist outlier which is attempting to limit, if not undermine, multilateral regional institutional arrangements that do not conform to its aspirations. This has in turn led to the continuation, exacerbation and escalation of the existing conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean and to further destabilisation of the region.

Therefore, unless there is a shift in Turkey's destabilising behaviour towards a more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with the European Union the latter risks facing – among others – a hot incident in the Eastern Mediterranean involving one of its members (Greece) and Turkey; further deterioration of relations between a prominent EU member (France) and Turkey; further collision of its priorities and security concerns under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Turkey's foreign policy; and the undermining of its geopolitical voice and its ability to promote democracy and peace in its immediate neighbourhood.

**Eduard Soler i Lecha, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)**

The Eastern Mediterranean is the most obvious point of connection between Europe and the Middle East Security Complex. Thus, it is also through the Eastern Mediterranean that some EU member states and with them the whole of the EU can become engulfed in the dangerous game of liquid alliances in the Middle East. Not only because the interstate relations in the region are often driven by a logic of negative sum game (too many are ready to afford a loss if their rivals lose even more), but also because those alliances change very quickly and make it very difficult to define long-term strategies. On top of this, intersecting conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the North could contribute to turning EU-Turkey relations from an unsatisfying partnership into a full-fledged rivalry. In

such a relation both parties could perceive the other as a threat. It's not too late to avoid this happening but the risk is becoming more real by the day.

**Stephan Roll, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

The main risk for the EU is that the various regional and supra-regional conflicts currently being fought out in the Eastern Mediterranean will continue to intermingle while EU member states are unable to agree on a consistent approach to conflict management. The ongoing territorial conflict between the two EU member states Greece and Cyprus on the one hand and Turkey on the other hand is fuelled by the dispute over newly discovered natural gas fields. In addition, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a significant arena for the regional conflict between Turkey and a number of Arab states. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are fighting with Turkey over regional supremacy under the cover of ideological issues, namely the influence of Political Islam. While the EU should stand by its EU allies Greece and Cyprus, it should certainly not take sides in the antagonism between Turkey and the Arab states. The latter are hyper-authoritarian regimes, which themselves pursue extremely problematic regional policies. Therefore, close regional cooperation, such as France is cultivating with Egypt and the UAE, should by no means be an option. This also applies for energy policy, where the EU should seek an inclusive approach by ensuring that regional initiatives such as the East Mediterranean Gas Forum are open to all riparian states including Turkey.

**Ahmet Sözen, Eastern Mediterranean University, Famagusta**

The conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean are increasingly morphing towards military conflicts rather than purely diplomatic ones. This is a big risk to the internal security and cooperation of both NATO and the EU. At the heart of all the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean lies the Cyprus conflict. Without solving the Cyprus conflict, seeking to resolve the other conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean would be futile. In other words, decoupling Cyprus would be like putting the cart before the horse. Maybe the tensions among the actors could be diffused temporarily. However, solving the Cyprus conflict through a comprehensive settlement would play a triggering role in solving the rest of the conflicts – which are mostly related to maritime border delineation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Currently, both the Greek Cypriot side as well as the Turkish Cypriot side have been sticking to maximalist positions. While the Greek Cypriot side sticks to the 'sovereignty' gun and refuses to include the Turkish Cypriot side in decision processes on the use of hydrocarbons around Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriot side, at least in its rhetoric, states that federation is dead and the only solution to the Cyprus problem is cooperation between two 'sovereign' states. The UN and the international community, therefore, are faced with these maximalist sovereignty-based positions and will need to employ a carefully designed, balanced approach in untying this knot.

**Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Kadir Has University, Istanbul**

Since at least November 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean has become increasingly militarised. With the signing of the two MOUs between Turkey and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord in Libya, tensions have risen on both political and military fronts where multilateral schemes by some littoral states meant to counter Turkey's coercive diplomacy and tactics in the region with the inclusion of several extra-regional stakeholders, including states from the Gulf region. As these tensions are, partly, a consequence of the systemic change currently underway where multilateralism is under threat from the emerging poly-centric world, the European Union's inability to move forward on the Strategic Autonomy front makes it particularly vulnerable in the Eastern Mediterranean as it finds itself unable to protect the interests of its two member states in the region – namely Greece and Cyprus – and to project its normative framework with its neighbours, in particular Turkey. Consequently, the Union's effectiveness and leverage in advancing its interests are weakened as it fails to project itself strategically and may find itself marginalised and faced with faits accomplis with regard to the Cyprus conundrum, for example, that will further reduce its influence and lead into an existentialist spiral to both its detriment and that of its member states, in the region as well as across its neighbourhoods.

**Abdulla Ibrahim, Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Geneva**

The East-Med conflicts pose direct short-term risks to Europe and the EU, but the indirect long-term risks might be more fatal. Threat of military confrontation with an EU member state, uncontrolled migration waves and terrorism are interconnected but controllable under the existing mechanisms. The NATO-facilitated negotiations between Turkey and Greece on deconfliction seem to be welcomed by all parties; the renegotiation of a new migration deal with Turkey should help improve managing the migration file; and advances toward a political solution in Libya as foreign fighters return to their origins should reduce the risks of terrorists finding their way to Europe. The long-term risk, however, is the weakening of the EU's internal cohesion. The issues at stake in the East-Med (i.e., legal, energy and security/geopolitical) are diverse and overlapping, setting the foundation for different threat perceptions, hence variant positions for each EU member state. Three elements of a long-term response strategy could be proposed to maintain EU unity: prioritise the issues to build internal consensus, engage strategically to deconflict and de-militarise the conflict, and collaborate with others for deterrence and to create neutral spaces for mediation/dialogue.

**Dorothee Schmid, French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), Paris**

The Eastern Mediterranean appears today as an area saturated by projections of different types of interests from an increasing variety of actors. These interests can

be of an economic (fight for energy resources) or legal/strategic nature (definition of EEZs); and they emerge at an individual (migrant families), national and multilateral (NATO, EU, Eastern Med Gas Forum) level. Being at the same time an area of resources and a transit space, the East-Med attracts attention from external powers who transform it into a theatre of competition (Russia, the United States). The Eastern Mediterranean is thus subject to growing pressures and frictions that could easily degenerate into military skirmishes. The escalation of tensions between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus in the summer of 2020 epitomised the degradation of the relationship between Turkey and the EU, transforming it into a strategic standoff, and threatening to import within the European space the systemic conflictuality prevailing in the Middle East. The search for a common European strategic approach towards Turkey has not reached consistent results so far, unveiling to the contrary deep internal dissension between some member states, notably France and Germany. The risks for Europe are thus of a strategic, political and also economic nature – as tensions make the exploitation of energy resources impossible and even hinder the development of tourism, which is a major source of revenues for bordering states.

**Günter Seufert, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

There is no doubt that profound changes in the international balance of power form the global background for the conflicts in the eastern Mediterranean. However, this does not change the fact that it is primarily Turkey's policy that has triggered and escalated the conflicts. Whether in the Aegean or Nagorno-Karabakh, in Libya, in Syria or Africa, Ankara no longer sees itself as a status quo power. It seeks to expand its influence, relying primarily on military strength. The goal is to project power far beyond the borders of Anatolia. Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean are part of a larger strategy that includes the systematic and rapid development of the Turkish weapons industry as well as the establishment of military bases, primarily but not only in Africa. So far, the European Union has not found a clear strategy toward Turkish policy. One reason for this is the different interests of its member states vis-à-vis Turkey and the region. Only if the EU commits itself to a rules-based policy can it overcome the different interests of its member states. This means that Brussels adheres to the rules that it has long propagated. Cooperation or confrontation with Ankara must depend on whether Turkey submits to international law, as in the Eastern Mediterranean; follows internationally recognised frameworks for conflict resolution, as in Cyprus; and adheres to treaties and agreements, as in the customs union and refugee cooperation.