

As Turkish and Greek Leaders Meet, Stability is the Watchword

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The Greek-Turkish relationship remains on ‘thin ice’ but both sides have an interest in stability at a time of geopolitical turbulence.

The Greek capital will be on high alert on Thursday, with 3,500 police officers, snipers and special anti-terrorist officers securing the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Expectations of a breakthrough in relations between the neighbours are not high, but analysts say maintaining stability would be victory enough at a time of huge geopolitical turbulence.

“Greece and Turkey are at the centre of a triangle of instability,” said Professor Panayotis Tsakonas of the University of Athens, head of the foreign policy and security programme at the Hellenic Foundation of European and Foreign Policy, ELIAMEP, in reference to events in Nagorno-Karabakh over the summer, the war in Ukraine and ongoing Israeli operations in Gaza.

“For different reasons, the two countries prefer to buy useful stability time,” Tsakonas said.

Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, a professor of politics and international relations at the London Metropolitan University, said some “positive momentum” might be expected, but Turkish local elections in March 2024 may yet rock relations given Erdogan’s tendency to lash out at rival states during campaigning.

“The leaders of the two countries will continue to walk on thin ice,” he told BIRN.

Desire to ease tensions



The flags of Greece and Cyprus (L), Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (R) fly over the divided Nicosia, Cyprus, 20 November 2016. Photo: EPA/KATIA CHRISTODOULOU

Thursday’s meeting in Athens is the fifth within the framework of the Greece-Turkey Cooperation Council; the first was held in May 2010, followed by three more rounds in 2013, 2014 and 2016.

But since then, relations have soured significantly, with Greece and Turkey at odds over a number of issues, not least the migrant and refugee crisis that erupted in 2016, drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean, minority rights and maritime demarcation.

The latest meeting was agreed between Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius in July.

The agenda is hardly ambitious, encompassing confidence-building measures, cooperation on tourism and education, and common challenges such as migration and natural disasters.

Erdogan struck an optimistic note on Wednesday, telling reporters: “There is nothing we cannot resolve with Greece through dialogue.”

Ozturk told BIRN: “Both countries would like to ease tensions in bilateral relations that were seriously shaken by multiple issues in recent years.”

But Tsakonas said progress was unlikely on any of the major issues between the two.

“If we can talk about progress, it will be in terms of some of these issues of the bilateral positive agenda being included in this cooperation council, and some agreements will be signed,” he said.

“There are no expectations of any progress in the political dialogue.”

Signs of movement on migration

Migrants, who came across Turkey, make land from an overloaded rubber dinghy as they arrive at the coast near Mithimna, Lesbos island, Greece, 05 October 2015. Photo: EPA/ZOLTAN BALOGH HUNGARY OUT

Ozturk said he expected nothing to change on the question of Muslims in Western Thrace, northeastern Greece. Turkey wants them recognised as Turks, something Greece has refused.

“President Erdogan may speak about the rights of Turks in Western Thrace because of the local elections because there are an important number of Turks in Turkey who originate from Western Thrace,” said Ozturk. Greece under Mitsotakis is also unlikely to give ground, he said.

Tsakonas said: “The Muslims in Thrace are the tail of Erdogan’s grand narrative that seeks to highlight Turkey as the protector of Muslims everywhere.”

The issue of Cyprus, effectively partitioned between Greeks and Turks since a Turkish invasion of the north in 1974 in response to a Greek-backed military coup, remains key to relations between Athens and Ankara. But again there is no sign of any imminent breakthrough.

On migration, Greek media reports suggest some small steps may be imminent.

With many migrants and refugees crossing Turkey and Greece en route to Western Europe, reports say discussions are under way to exchange coast guard officials in order to create an open line of communication.

“This is the topic both governments can easily cooperate on,” said Ozturk. “Turkey is expected to stop refugee flows, and Greece will not accept new refugees. If Athens sends refugees back, Turkey will accept. Recently, this system works quite well, and governments can easily increase

cooperation in the area.”

Tsakonas said the EU lacks a strategy on migration. “It tries to keep the problem out of its yard by paying for as long as it takes,” he told BIRN. “Four billion euros must be allocated to Turkey within the next period. The EU will set the conditions of a new treaty, but due to the lack of a strategy, Greece may set some conditions.”

On the question of airspace and sea borders, Ozturk said Turkey is under pressure to ease tensions in the Aegean.

“As the world deals with the war in Ukraine and the Hamas-Israel conflict, Erdogan would not like to create more international tension,” he said.

While this may not translate into an actual deal, he said, “we will probably see a drop in the number of dogfights in the air and at sea”.

The frequency of Turkish violations of Greek airspace has decreased since a devastating earthquake in Turkey in February, but Tsakonas said violations in general “have not stopped” and will probably continue.