

# EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGIONAL DYNAMICS: CONFLICTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION SUPPORT

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## **Introduction**

Diplomatic engagement between countries in the Eastern Mediterranean presents the opportunity for greater regional cooperation on a range of issues, including policy, security and economic growth. Increased cooperation has the potential to lead to shared regional norms and institutions that promote regional stability and aid in conflict resolution support. But the potential for regional cohesion is limited, both because of differences in national priorities and recent and long-standing conflicts. This policy brief explores the limitations and potential of conflict resolution support in the Eastern Mediterranean. It offers operational recommendations for experts and policy-makers working to strengthen regional dialogue and find new lenses for approaching conflict resolution.

## **Cohesion and Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean**

The “Eastern Mediterranean” is defined differently by geographers, policy-makers and experts. Within the field of regional policy analysis, it typically includes Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Presently, the region is characterised more by conflict than by cohesion. This is due largely, but not only, to the ongoing Syrian war, which has drawn multiple countries into active military engagement. While there are numerous bilateral diplomatic relations and trade agreements within the region, there are also active and passive conflicts, non-existent relations (such as between Israel and Lebanon), as well as tenuous and fragile relations (including Turkey’s diplomatic status with Israel and Greece).

Therefore, the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean are less strongly united than they are divided. Sometimes this division is the result of direct conflict, and other times it is caused by differing priorities, extra-regional alliances, and ties to international organisations. Greece and Turkey, for example, are members of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), and bound to the commitments of that membership; Greece and Cyprus are members of the European Union (EU) and tied to its larger political and economic structures. Ties to

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international organisations, as well as great power alliances, can leave Eastern Mediterranean countries with divergent priorities. In addition, the major conflicts of the region are primarily addressed not by sub-regional actors but rather by superpowers and international organisations.

The Syrian war is a major example of regional limitations and complexities. The interests of Eastern Mediterranean countries are affected by what happens in Syria but there is no Eastern Mediterranean regional group or country that has played a major role in working to resolve the war. When regional countries do engage in conflict resolution efforts, it is through larger alliances with major powers. A primary example of this is Turkey, a country that is militarily engaged in Syria but participates in conflict resolution as part of the Russia-Iran-Turkey-led Astana Process, a series of political talks held outside of the official Geneva process framework established by the UN Security Council (UNSC). The United States (US) and Russia play the major roles in international conflict resolution efforts on Syria, both directly, multilaterally, and by promoting or blocking action at the UNSC. The two powers have divergent views on the future of post-conflict Syria and on the goals of military action; these differences are mirrored by their allies in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Syrian war has diplomatic and security implications for every country in the region, and Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean are increasingly challenged by the refugee crisis that has mostly affected Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Greece. But regional countries do not share a common understanding of military or diplomatic objectives. Israel, for example, is most concerned with the entrenchment of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in southern Syria, and the movement of missiles and advanced weaponry throughout Syrian territory. Turkey is also militarily engaged in Syria but its priorities are quite different, and it has focused on countering Islamic State (IS) and confronting Kurdish fighters near its own border.

This assessment of regional dynamics reveals great challenges to cooperation and successful conflict resolution support. But there are also opportunities for positive change. While the discovery of gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean is unlikely to transform regional geopolitical realities, increased cooperation on these resources can lead to heightened collaboration on other issues.

The next section of this article will briefly describe the main challenges, elements and best practices that should be taken into account while discussing conflict resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## **Key Elements of Conflict Resolution Efforts**

Conflicts differ in scope and nature, but an analysis of any conflict resolution effort may yield lessons that can be applied to other situations. Even unsuccessful conflict resolution processes can reveal helpful and harmful mechanisms and approaches. Beyond that general

principle, there are specific elements of conflict resolution that have broad relevance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Borders, for example, are a core issue in both the Cyprus and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Sacred spaces are relevant to Cyprus, Israel, Palestine and Turkey, and the protection of minority rights is a crucial aspect of every conflict.

Another important element is the inclusion of “spoilers” in conflict resolution processes (“spoilers” refer to actors that have a stake in a specific conflict but may “make every effort to stop the process by using various tactics of persuasion and incitement” [Bar-Tal, 2012]). While some conflict resolution processes exclude such groups, others attempt to include them or incorporate their interests, “either because their lives are directly affected by the results, or because their opposition could prevent an agreement altogether” (Scheidlin, 2017).

Most conflict resolution processes in the Eastern Mediterranean involve refugee crises, claims and compensation. Refugees are an enduring core component of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Cyprus conflict, and decades of conflict have not diminished the relevance of refugee claims to comprehensive peace deals. Any future conflict resolution efforts must consider how and when refugee issues should be addressed. There is an opportunity for experts and analysts to identify common trends and parameters on the issues of refugees, and advance them. In her research on comparative conflict resolution, Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin identifies a common framework for approaching this issue. In the case of Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution, Scheindlin (2017) explains that “the demand of Palestinian refugees for recognition and return need not be viewed in terms of a desire to destroy Israel, but rather as consistent with international norms and expectations”. Assessing refugee issues through a broader lens may open space for parties to negotiate mutually acceptable solutions.

The largest active refugee crisis in the region is the result of the Syrian war; its violence and brutality led to millions of Syrian citizens fleeing to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Greece and other countries. There is a need for greater regional cooperation on how to address this refugee crisis to protect the individual refugees and best use limited resources and capacities. This is an instance in which Eastern Mediterranean actors have more common interests, even though Syria is unique to the region in both its size and the scope of external involvement.

### **Warning Signs: The Risks of Moving from Conflict Resolution to a Conflict Management Strategy**

Actors engaged in conflict resolution can learn from counterproductive strategies used in other processes, and observe the effects of new paradigms. One of the relevant lessons in the Eastern Mediterranean relates to stagnation, when countries abandon active, genuine conflict resolution efforts and move towards conflict management policies. The conflict management paradigm is based on two assessments: first, that a conflict can be contained

at a relatively low level over time; and, second, that conflict resolution requires undesirable compromises and an unacceptable risk of increased violence if efforts fail. The “conflict management” approach has contributed to the enduring Cyprus conflict, and it has taken hold in policies towards the Israel-Palestine conflict. In both cases, it has led to protracted conflict and the risk of further destabilisation.

### **Supporting Constructive Policies and Negotiations**

States and international organisations can directly support conflict resolution processes in the Eastern Mediterranean using a variety of tools, including proposing incentives to one or both sides. Such incentives might take the form of expanded diplomatic relations, military cooperation, or more favourable trade terms. They may come into effect following either a final peace deal or a concrete step towards peace. They are most relevant when the external actor has an interest within the conflict zone. Turkey, for example, has a long-standing interest in supporting reconstruction in Gaza, and may be well-poised to offer Israel incentives in exchange for increased humanitarian access. Improved Israel-Turkey ties could also leave Turkey more capable of providing constructive help for the Gaza crisis, ultimately benefiting Gaza, Israel and the stability of the Eastern Mediterranean as a whole.

Regional and international actors can also support innovative proposals. For example, the Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute and conflict over exclusive economic zone (EEZ) boundaries has the potential to further destabilise regional dynamics. But there have been proposals for a type of “grand bargain” between the two countries, in which oil and gas are exported to Europe through an Israel-Turkey pipeline that uses Lebanese territorial waters. In this proposal, Lebanon would receive rights to areas of the disputed maritime zone, and “in addition to cost savings, security concerns could further entice Israel to end the dispute with Lebanon for a mediated understanding on oil and gas. An Israel-Turkey pipeline passing through Lebanese waters would be less susceptible to dangers from water pressure at ultra-deep water depths, where natural damage or sabotage could result in economic and environmental catastrophe” (Maksad & Seznec, 2017).

While the possibility of energy cooperation and shared economic gains has not led to renewed regional conflict resolution efforts, there are specific elements of potential cooperation that can be used to mitigate disputes and increase coordination. To engage constructively on specific issues, policy-makers must identify the convergence of their own objectives and the specific forms of leverage that they are positioned to offer.

### **Opportunities for Positive Change**

#### **Gas Fields in the Mediterranean Sea: Cooperation or Competition?**

Discovery of gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea – particularly the Aphrodite, Tamar, Leviathan and Zohr fields – presents an opportunity to transform the Eastern Mediterranean’s

energy profile. The gas fields are also rearranging regional dynamics, and providing an opportunity for cooperative efforts in and beyond the energy sector. Positive indicators can be seen in the “energy triangle” developed between Cyprus, Israel and Greece, and the increased diplomatic engagement that resulted. During Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s first trip to Israel in 2015, for example, he announced that Israel, Cyprus and Greece would hold a trilateral meeting to focus on energy issues. Tsipras and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu discussed expanding cooperation, and Tsipras reported that he spoke with Netanyahu about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and as a “friend of Israel” offered Greece’s help in facilitating negotiations (Keinon, 2015).

In another case, in 2014-2015, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots renewed their negotiations, based on a joint declaration between leaders to reject the status quo and create a positive environment. Some argue that these negotiations were prompted by changing energy dynamics, and largely “driven by the discovery of natural gas and the wish of the EU and US to reconcile the Republic of Cyprus with Turkey and facilitate a [broader] Turkey-Israel rapprochement” (Stergiou, 2016). In a third case, Egypt and Cyprus expanded their diplomatic engagement on the basis of energy cooperation and the transfer of gas to new markets, and this led to upgraded joint work on countering violent extremism. Looking to the future, some scholars posit that natural gas wealth could be used “as an opportunity to build interdependent links and fund the inevitable cost of any negotiated settlement of the Cyprus question” through the formation of EEZs (Grigoriadis, 2017).

But the discovery of gas fields also presents a challenge: that resource competition will add another layer to existing conflicts, as “competition over the rights to tap those resources is compounding existing tensions over sovereignty and maritime borders” (Zhukov, 2013). This can be seen in the protracted Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute, when Hezbollah threatens to target offshore Israeli gas rigs. While the dispute has at times compelled Israel to “expand political, military and economic cooperation with other local stakeholders, particularly Cyprus” (Zhukov, 2013), it has not proven to be the game-changer that some envisioned vis-à-vis Lebanon. The exploration of the Gaza Marine fields is another point of contention, for Israelis and Palestinians, that appears to add a new facet to a long-standing conflict.

Some analysts point out that competition can be harnessed into cooperation and sub-regional cohesion; for example, although the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alliance blocks Turkish “regional hegemony, it also provides a place for Turkey in the regional order” (Lerman, 2015). In 2017, Greek Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades committed to promoting closer relations between Egypt and the EU, and announced a vision that “the discovery of hydrocarbon deposits in the wider region becomes a catalyst for wider cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, contributing to regional peace, stability and prosperity” (“Tsipras, Sisi, Anastasiades Meet to Discuss New Gas Deposits”, 2017).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Increased engagement and policy dialogue between countries in the Eastern Mediterranean can enhance regional stability and lead to opportunities for conflict resolution support. There is value in countries undertaking efforts to promote the sub-region, both through official action and on the civil society level. The discovery of gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea has economic potential for the entire sub-region but the existence of these resources is not enough to compel countries to resolve joint conflicts. However, there are specific cases in which negotiations over gas pipelines may be leveraged into broader political support for conflict resolution mechanisms. Countries should act independently or as part of a group to identify and propose incentives for progress towards conflict resolution efforts; these incentives can be economic or political in nature. In addition, policy experts can contribute to the field of conflict resolution efforts by identifying best practices and lessons learned.

The following recommendations may be relevant as tools for scholars and experts working to advance conflict resolution, and for policy-makers who see value in increasing cooperation and promoting conflict resolution support in the Eastern Mediterranean. They include direct governmental support for conflict resolution efforts and indirect incentives, multilateral efforts, as well as civil society engagement.

- 1. Establish regular sub-regional mechanisms for cooperation.** Regular joint policy dialogues, bilateral exchanges on specific issues, and sub-regional conferences will increase the cohesion of the sub-region and can facilitate conflict resolution cooperation. Such mechanisms may be explicitly based on conflict resolution but, even if they are not, they provide a forum for side dialogue and sub-regional engagement. These mechanisms can also be used to increase cooperation between various government ministries and parliaments.
- 2. Establish institutions and/or yearly regional conferences.** There are a variety of models for policy-makers to consider and adapt, including thematic models (such as the G7, which meets annually to discuss economic policies), and regional models (such as ASEAN, which focuses on regional peace, collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest). If policy-makers do not see value in creating new institutions specific to the Eastern Mediterranean, they can still increase regional stability and cooperation by strengthening participation in already existing regional initiatives, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).
- 3. Increase dialogue on shared challenges, such as the refugee crisis.** The Syrian war caused a large-scale international refugee crisis. International efforts to mitigate this crisis and provide assistance to refugees, and to countries such as Greece, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which face difficulty absorbing the large

number of refugees, has been insufficient. The Eastern Mediterranean is particularly affected by this crisis and can benefit from further sub-regional engagement and joint problem-solving.

**4. When possible, identify and propose incentives for conflict resolution efforts.**

States can offer support for specific policies, identify ways to leverage increased economic cooperation, and offer diplomatic or economic incentives for pro-peace policies or actions.

**5. Facilitate civil society cooperation.** Through civil society networks, experts exchange ideas and develop recommendations. States should promote civil society ties, people-to-people programmes, and exchanges (scientific/technical and student exchanges). The networks of think tanks and policy actors that already exist can be further developed, and a more established sub-regional civil society network will elevate the level of shared knowledge on conflict resolution. Civil society actors are well-poised to assess and distribute comparative conflict resolution research on best practices and lessons learned from previous conflict resolution efforts.

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