

**EAST MEDITERRANEAN
GEOPOLITICAL ENERGY ELBOWING WITH
AN AMERICAN, RUSSIAN,
ISRAELI, TURKISH,
AND IRANIAN PREFIX:
THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AND
REGIONAL ACTORS**

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ABSTRACT

The Leviathan gas deposit discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean Israeli Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 2010 by the U.S. Noble Energy Company is in fact Syria's stake in "democratization." The drilling of natural gas has given birth to a new conflict in the region: Israel, Syria and the Gaza Strip claiming drilling rights as well.

Cyprus (an EU member country) has not given up either, nor has Lebanon, which

asked the U.N. to recognize its right to drill in its territorial waters, Hezbollah being the most vocal in this regard.

Turkey presented Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with the project of a Qatar-Saudi Arabia-Iraq-Syria-Turkey gas pipeline, via which natural gas could have been exported to Europe too, to the detriment of the Russian Federation, however the Syrian President refused, implementing Iran's natural gas pipeline project instead.

This analysis and the facts, names, and figures included in it have no relation whatsoever to my work in the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Construction of the natural gas pipeline started immediately. Spurred on by the U.S., Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia began directly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood as a destabilizing element for the “traitorous” regimes that were negotiating the Leviathan’s potential with Iran, Russia, China, and India.

Turkish warships are engaged in all kinds of conflicts with American, Israeli, and Cypriot prospecting vessels in the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey imports 60 per cent of

its natural gas needs from Russia and cannot allow its “historical enemy” to manage the Leviathan deposit too. It is hoped that the advantage will be reversed once the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power.

This analysis, based on the neo-realist school of thought in geopolitics, aspires to shed light on the geopolitical game being played astride the media coverage of the Syrian civil war and Eastern Mediterranean gas deposit potential.

KEYWORDS: *energy security, Middle East, energy deposits, East Mediterranean, the U.S., EU, Russia, Iran, Turkey, civil war in Syria, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Kurds.*

Introduction

The estimates that have been circulating for several decades now regarding huge deposits of natural gas resources on the crisis-driven southeastern shore of the Mediterranean and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Republic of Cyprus turned out to be true when, in December 2011, official research studies confirmed what used to be rumors. In 2009, in cooperation with Noble Energy (Texas, U.S.), Israel discovered an offshore natural gas deposit in the Levantine basin, just 80 km west of the harbor of Haifa, containing some 238 bcm, which was named Tamar. It was the most significant natural gas discovery of the year and news of paramount importance for Israel, which, unlike most of its Arab neighbors, was deprived of energy efficiency.

A year later, a 450 bcm offshore deposit, 5 km below sea level, was discovered slightly to the west but still in Israel’s EEZ, which was named Leviathan after the Bible sea monster. The geopolitical equation is completed by a 2-3 tcm natural gas deposit presumed to be hidden in Herodotus basin, under the jurisdiction of the Hellenic Republic.¹

It came as no surprise that the 3,400 bcm of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil ready to be extracted from the depths of the Eastern Mediterranean sea—including the underwater deposits of the Nile delta in Egypt—once again became international spotlights in this troubled region and in the states surrounding it. Even before Tamar becomes productive (estimated for the 1st quarter of 2013), just the prospect of natural gas exploration in a region so close to the “energy thirsty” European Union market reversed the geopolitical map and prompted the Union’s reconsideration of the region.

This geo-economic reconfiguration on the Eastern Mediterranean shores, arising in the context of a three-year worsening of relations between Turkey and Israel and the use of aggressive wording by Turkish officials against the Republic of Cyprus, evidently brought Israel and Cyprus, and not surprisingly Greece as well, closer together. This realignment made the geostrategic Cyprus-Crete-Peloponnese-Ionian Sea-Italy corridor probably the most efficient export route for Israel’s energy resources to the European market.

¹ See: [http://www.science.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers/bdd/res/2619/quel-avenir-pour-le-gaz-naturel], 11 No-vember, 2012.

Keeping in mind that the EU is currently importing some 83% of its oil and 57% of its natural gas requirements, the deposits in Israel, Cyprus, and Greece will be enough to meet the needs of the 27-member EU for around twenty years. Equally, taking into account that natural gas consumption in the EU reached 471 Gm³ in 2007 and is increasing at a rate of 3% every year, as well as the fact that Europe is aiming to reduce carbon-dioxide contamination by 2020 (by abandoning coal burning), the geostrategic significance of the Eastern Mediterranean energy resources is obvious. This significance is highlighted by the extremely sensitive political and geostrategic transition happening in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and, of course, Iran, and the highly competitive nature of relations between the Russian Federation and the Washington-London axis.

Israel, which has been struggling recently to assure it is supplied with enough natural gas from the international market, while its own deposits are dwindling, is also very aware of this significance. At a moment, when the so-called Arab Spring has been ravaging the Libyan and Egypt regimes (Tel Aviv is receiving 40% of its natural gas imports from Egypt), a member of the Islamic Muslim Brotherhood party has become president in Cairo, and the U.S.-backed Lebanese Hezbollah is claiming part of the Tamar deposit, the prospect of quick exploitation of underwater resources has given the Hebrew state a powerful boost and optimism.

The Russian Factor

The EU market seems ideal for advancing the East Mediterranean hydrocarbons of the Israel-Cyprus-Greece energy triangular, which naturally functions with American blessings. In any case, the Anglo-Saxons (U.S.-UK) have always associated Cyprus' geopolitical significance with energy efficiency. It is enough to remember that the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the construction of which was actively backed by Washington and London, ends opposite Apostle Andrew Cape on the Karpassia Peninsula occupied since 1974 by Turkey. In other words, Cyprus is a strategically crucial point for the pipeline and control of energy resources in the region called the Greater Middle East.

However, the economic hardships of Greece and Cyprus and the very good relations both states have with Moscow might prompt Athens and Nicosia to turn to Russia, which has always been interested in the region's development, in search of an alternative. It is worth saying that both Soviet and post-communist Russian foreign policy has been engaged in a *Realpolitik* strategy and economic penetration into Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey, aiming to weaken those countries' links with the West and extending Russian influence to the south. The 2.5-billion Russian loan to the troubled Cypriot economy has assured the importance of Russian investments, on the one hand, and has reaffirmed the stable political and economic ties with Nicosia, on the other. It stands to reason that Moscow declared it would not accept the objections Ankara had to Cyprus signing a deal with America's Noble Energy Company aimed at developing its energy resources.

The climate changes are creating an exit channel around the Arctic Circle necessary for facilitating the transportation of Russian trade goods. The Kremlin has been eagerly seeking such an exit channel in the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea, and even through Afghanistan in the Indian Ocean for three hundred years, but has always been ostensibly denied by Britain. Indeed, Russia is entering the second decade of the 21st century free of the "Rimland" burden, in other words, the strip of coastal land that, according to American geographer Nicholas John Spykman's theory, encircled Eurasia and obstructed Russia's free access to the Mediterranean Sea and, consequently, gave the Ottoman Empire and nowadays Turkey a "special relationship" with the Anglo-Saxon countries of the West, and then also with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the second half of

the 20th century. Realizing this, Turkey has tried to find something unique in its geopolitical and geostrategic position on the map and invented the “New-Ottoman theory” to charm the Arab-Muslim and Persian-Muslim Shi‘a world in order to use it as a tool for being accepted as the new hegemonic power in the oil- and natural gas-producing region of the Middle East.²

As for Russia, it risks losing Syria, its long-time Cold-War ally, where it maintains a significant naval power base (Tartous), due to the ongoing civil war there. This is a delicate situation since there is the real possibility that the Kremlin will seek to alternatively station its naval power elsewhere in the region or even in Cyprus, a member state of the Euro zone, with which it has excellent relations. This will give Russia the right to become actively involved in the island’s energy resource development. Several Russian companies are already competing to acquire offshore resource exploitation permits from the Cypriot government, causing many people in the EU to worry about Moscow’s potentially strong position in the island’s natural gas sector.

Of course, Moscow is maintaining equally good relations with Israel, which is less than happy about the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood-backed opposition forces in Syria waging a harsh battle against the Assad regime. Tel-Aviv, which enjoys the backing of Moscow, is considering building an underwater natural gas pipeline, stretching from its deposits in the Levantine basin across Cyprus territorial waters to the Greek mainland, with the aim of supplying the European market. As a matter of fact, this is the third trustworthy alternative hydrocarbon transportation route to the EU markets (the other two involving Russian and Azeri resources) that could ultimately provide Europe with the energy that the Nabucco project failed to offer.³ The European states would no doubt prefer to rely on the loyal, according to the International Law of the Sea, Cyprus EEZ demarcation with Israel than on analogous claims by Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria.⁴

In addition, the Cyprus Republic has signed a defense cooperation treaty with Israel to provide security for mutual natural gas deposits,⁵ and, while on an official visit to Tel-Aviv, the Greek Defense Minister discussed engaging the Hellenic navy forces to protect the energy installations.⁶ Given that security is a decisive question for investing money in the construction of energy installations, these decisions offer a good framework for advancing the cooperation scheme Israel is elaborating with Cyprus and Greece.

Furthermore, due to the number of Israeli citizens and family members working at the storage terminal to be constructed using Israel funds close to Famagusta, Israel and Cyprus have agreed to the stationing of an Israeli force, the task of which will be to protect them and the installations. The pact includes a term that provides the Israeli forces with access to the Cypriot defense units.⁷ Obviously, Israel will be present in Cyprus for a long time and this is no doubt occurring with Washington’s consent. As a consequence, the Republic of Cyprus is becoming part of the Hebrew state’s strategic survival, security, and well-being.

This is creating a security belt around the energy deposits of the Eastern Mediterranean thought to be strong enough to annihilate Turkey’s threats against Cyprus, as well as Ankara’s attempts to draw the limits of its EEZ with Egypt without reference to the lawful rights of the Greek island of Kastelorizo, another Turkish mechanism aiming to deprive Hellenic and Cypriot EEZ from sharing limits.

² See: J. Mazis, *The Israel-Cyprus-Greece Axis Secrets. The European Energy Reality. Action Taken by the U.S. and Russia. Turkish Planning for Kastelorizo Island*, Foreign Affairs-The Hellenic Edition, March 2012, pp. 10-11 (in Greek).

³ See: A. Stergiou, “Russian Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and its Implications for the EU External Action,” available at [<http://iss.europa.eu/publications/>], 25 July, 2012.

⁴ See: Ibidem.

⁵ See: J. Kanter, “Race for Gas by Cypriot Rivals Adds to Tensions,” *New York Times*, 30 August, 2012.

⁶ See: M. Sukkariéh, “Eastern Mediterranean: Will Gazprom Advance Russia’s Influence in the Region?” *Middle East Strategic Perspectives*, 22 October, 2012.

⁷ See: J. Kanter, op. cit.

The U.S. and the EU are against Russia's intervention in the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas deposit exploration and production. But Israel, Cyprus, and Greece are favoring this in an attempt to boost their justification for eventually entering a conflict with Turkey, and in the case of Israel, with other enemy neighbors.

It is quite interesting that having secured the right of passage through the Turkish EEZ in the Black Sea for the imminent construction of the South Stream natural gas pipeline (28 December, 2011), Gazprom, known for its connections with the Kremlin, is trying to purchase bonds of the Hellenic DEPA oil and natural gas state company. According to a statement by Leonid Zyuganov, Head of Gazprom's Project Management Department, "the company's interest in DEPA has no connection with the South Stream project and the decision that the scheduled pipeline will not cross Greek territory is solely related to the market, not to the owner of DEPA," meaning the low natural gas demand in Greece and Southern Italy due to the debt crisis in the two southern European countries. Many analysts think that, despite the fact that today's South Stream project is crippling Greece, "the officially declared Russian interest in the Greek energy market makes the country's re-inclusion in South Stream planning quite possible. Some even argue that it is being used as a negotiation tool for DEPA's purchase by Gazprom."⁸

It is also interesting that Gazprom signed an agreement with Israel on the production and preliminary purchase of 2 to 3 million tons of liquefied natural gas during President Putin's visit to the country (July 2012). Providing that it achieves DEPA's acquisition, Gazprom is planning to buy more Israeli and Cypriot natural gas, transport it in liquefied form to the Greek mainland, and sell it through DEPA's network to the European markets. In parallel, Washington, while providing a strong boost to Cyprus' right to exploit its energy resources, has established the first of chain of "Energy Resource Bureaus" in the region in Nicosia.⁹

Geopolitical Binding of the Energy Resource Potential of the Eastern Mediterranean to the Evolution of the Civil Conflict in Syria: International and Regional Actors

In July 2011, while the conflict in Syria was still a protest against the Basar Al-Assad regime, Iran, Syria, and Iraq signed a natural gas pipeline construction agreement totaling \$10 billion, which, using the South Pars Iranian deposits in the Persian Gulf (the world's largest deposit that partially lies in the territory of Qatar) and running across Iraq, would reach Damascus in three years' time and from there go on to Lebanon coast, thus supplying the European market. This would be a Shi'a natural gas pipeline that would transport resources from Shi'a Iran though predominantly Shi'a Iraq to the Shi'a-friendly President Assad Alawi regime of Syria. This strategic planning gained impetus thanks to the discovery by Syrian companies of a huge natural gas deposit in Qara—comparable to that of Qatar—near the Lebanese border and the Russian naval base in the port of Tartous (August 2011).

⁸ L. Liagosa, "No Connection to South Stream Pipeline for Greece," Newspaper *I Kathimerini*, 13 November, 2012 (in Greek).

⁹ See: J. Mazis, *op. cit.*

If this Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline scenario comes to fruition, Qatar—which hosts the U.S. Central Command headquarters—risks being cut off from the hydrocarbon transport routes controlled by the United States and Turkey. Therefore, it is cooperating with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, the U.S., its NATO allies, and various facets of the Syrian opposition (only recently organized and having a single representative) against the Assad regime, aiming to avoid the delivery of Iranian and Syrian natural gas to the Mediterranean coast. There is no doubt that a Syrian government controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood would be in favor of building the Qatar pipeline, which could easily be extended to Turkey.

In a different scenario, according to the *Al-Akbar* Lebanese newspaper and information leaked by a big Western oil company,¹⁰ the U.S. is encouraging Qatar to construct an overland natural gas pipeline, which would transport its own gas and that of Israel and Lebanon from the Leviathan and Tamar deposits through Syria (particularly the Homs city area, a site of ferocious civil conflict) to the European markets, the first branch passing through Turkey and the second through the ports of Tripoli (Lebanon) and Lattakia (Syria). Nevertheless, despite the obvious geostrategic advantages this scenario offers Ankara, Doha, and in particular Tel-Aviv (the latter acquiring an overland pipeline to transport its energy resources at minimum cost), the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not offering the best guarantees of cooperation between the Hebrew state and Turkey.

Even though it favors a policy toward international recognition of the loyalty of political Islam, Ankara does not wish to establish supranational state cooperation that could influence its policy in the Gulf, Lebanon, and Iran. Its activism appears very legitimate in light of Ankara's political cooperation with Suni Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This is a major policy shift for Turkey, since by abandoning the "zero problem policy with neighbors," it is evaluating state-society relations in a particular country in accordance with the level of protest or violence that the latter suffers from. So Turkey is turning against Syria, its old ally and a close ally of Russian President Putin, aiming to strike the Middle East policy of Russia and Iran.

Russia, in turn, is worried that the regional balance of power established during the last two years in the Middle East with the advent of the Arab Spring movement may favor the development of transnational Islamism. Populated by around twenty million Muslims, considering itself a victim of Islamist activism since the 1990s, and facing the revival of the Islamists as lawful power mongers in many Arab countries, Russia does not want Saudi Arabia and Qatar to reinforce their positions to the detriment of Iran, with which the Kremlin is cooperating in a wide range of issues. In fact, by intensifying its ties with Iraq too, Moscow is increasingly isolating itself from Ankara in a way that is turning the two countries into permanent members of opposite regional alliances.

It is worth mentioning that should the Kremlin fail to strategically ease the development of the newly discovered natural gas deposits of its old Cold War ally, Syria, it risks seeing Turkey as a transportation and distribution hub of Syrian and Iranian gas to the international markets. Also Turkey, one third of the population of which is comprised of various national and religious minorities, is in danger of "being burned" in the same nationalist "fire" it is lighting for Syria by supporting the opposing Sunis.

Conclusion

Given that Syrian soil has become a battleground for the Iranian and Turkish secret services, the Israel-Cyprus-Greece axis is the only guarantee the West can count on in a region torn by the so-

¹⁰ See: N. Charara, "Syrie: Le trajet des gazoducs Qataris décide des zones de combat!" *Al-Akbar*, 15 November, 2012 [www.french.irib.ir/analyses].

called Arab Spring. Turkey is trying to act as a defender of “international legitimacy and humanism” in the Middle East in order to control the flow of resources from the new hydrocarbon Syrian deposits, as well as from the Eastern Mediterranean, by gaining the trust and support of the Arab World and the West. Ankara is well aware that should the Israel-Cyprus-Greece energy transportation axis become functional, it will no longer be in a position to threaten the West by means of the ITGI (Italy-Turkey-Greece-Italy) natural gas pipeline, or the Trans-Anatolian pipeline (June 2012) project it has signed with Azerbaijan in order to retain the geostrategic significance of the almost financially defunct Nabucco project.

It should be pointed out that the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean is shifting as a result of the Arab Spring movement’s cataclysmic effect in swiping away the Middle East regimes, as well as the energy alliance Israel has decided to form along with Cyprus and Greece. Moreover, given the strategic military pact that Tel-Aviv has signed with Athens, which is increasing Israel’s strategic significance and providing it with a vital political and energy connection to the West (September 2011), along with the strategic cooperation that Tel-Aviv has established with U.S.-supported Erbil (the capital of autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan)—the latter acting as a counterbalance to Iran, Syria and Turkey—it can be assumed that the development of an alternative framework for supplying energy resources to the EU will be strong enough to eliminate the possibility of growing Turkey-Russia energy cooperation.¹¹

Keeping in mind that the potential of the energy axis connecting Israel along the Cyprus-Crete-Ionian Sea route with the EU could increase six-fold within the next eight years, the West will be happy to be free, at least partially, of Arab and Iranian hydrocarbons, which would lead to the abolishment of the energy routes Turkey wishes to control.¹² This might eventually satisfy Washington, which is embittered by the position Ankara has chosen to take regarding the embargo the West imposed on Iran due to its nuclear program. It may also satisfy the EU since it will free it from its dependence on Turkey with respect to securing energy from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

This alternative energy route has raised significant interest. There have even been proposals to build an underwater natural gas pipeline called the East-Med Pipeline, which, connecting Israel-Cyprus-Greece, would continue through the Epirus region of Greece to the underwater section of the ITGI pipeline that goes to the coast of Italy.¹³ This scenario is thought to be the best long-term alternative, provided that additional energy deposits are discovered in the EEZ of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

¹¹ See: Th.N. Marketos, “The Energy Dimension of the ‘Kurdish Issue’ and the Geopolitical Binding of the ‘Wider Middle East’ with the Eastern Mediterranean: The Role of the U.S., Turkey and Iran,” *Scientific Analysis Research Centre Journal*, The Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Issue No. 83, April 2012 (in Greek).

¹² See: J. Mazis, op. cit.

¹³ See: Interview of Harris Samaras, President of the “Pytheas” company, to Interfax News Agency, 20 October, 2012.