

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker

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A ROAD WITH MANY THORNS: CURRENT CHALLENGES TO THE TURKISH-GREEK RELATIONS

George Karatasios

Turkish-Greek bilateral relations are always a difficult puzzle to solve, and depending on the situation, they go through periods of intense friction in tandem with attempts to reach a resolution, however partial.

The Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and the President of Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September of this year in order to preserve a positive atmosphere between Greece and Turkey.

Specifically, they discussed the "road map" of the two countries' future contacts, which includes four milestones: October 16, political dialogue, on October 17, a summit on creating positive agenda, mid-November scheduled confidence building measures and finally a December 7 meeting of the Supreme Cooperation Council of Greece-Turkey that will be held in Thessaloniki.

The mission will not be an easy one. However, since both leaders have achieved recent election victories, they have more room to maneuver. What follows are the most significant challenges as the two leaders seek to find a common ground to settle the core disagreements between Ankara and Athens.

Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul & Muslim Minority in the Western Thrace Region

To this day, both governments have intentionally avoided finding resolutions to the question of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul and the rights of the Muslim minority in Greece's Western Thrace. However now, due to the positive political environment, it is expected that the 'golden ratio' will be found.

The problems of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, such as the question of nomination of the priests, and the "Theological School of Halki" located in Istanbul's Heybeliada island, which was shut down by the Turkish authorities arbitrarily on January 12, 1971, appear as the most significant topics for the Greek side. On the other hand, Ankara still insists on redefining the Muslim minority in the Western Thrace as belonging to the Turkish ethnicity.

To achieve progress on these ongoing problems, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul has adopted a pragmatic approach by supporting Turkey's accession to the EU. In the eyes of the patriarchate, Turkey's integration with the EU will lead Ankara to adopt European values.

His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomeus' constructive policy on this matter became evident when he emphasized that good relations between Greece and Turkey will also inevitably impact the daily life of the citizens of both countries and will deepen the mutual trust between the two governments.¹

Likewise, the issue of religious freedom is an important chapter of the process. Both Athens and Ankara must implement reforms to improve the human rights situation, both in the context of its European perspective and its obligations towards its own citizens.²

Cyprus

Since the de-facto partition of the island in 1974, the Cyprus question has played an important role in Greek-Turkish relations. Together with Turkey and Britain, Greece is considered as a guarantor power on the island.³ It is hard to imagine a complete normalization of relations between Greece and Turkey without a prior resolution of the

Cyprus problem. This is a 50-year-old open wound with two missed milestones, the 2004 Annan Plan and the 2017 Crans-Montana talks.⁴

Nowadays, with the support of Ankara, the Turkish Cypriot side is intensifying tension on the island. To get international recognition and pressure the UN, the Turkish Cypriot leadership challenges the status quo in the island by seeking to construct a new road to the Pyla village in the buffer zone. Unsurprisingly, the UN peacekeeping force on the island intervened in the construction works and tried to prevent it. In response, the Turkish Foreign Ministry accused the UN of abandoning its neutrality towards the island.⁵ Parallel to that, recently during his speech at the UN General Assembly, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, drew the attention of the member states to the recognition of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC) - arguing that the recognition of the TRNC is the right choice for all countries that want to ensure lasting peace and tranquility on the island of Cyprus. Erdoğan went on and defined the TRNC as the most concrete reality of Cyprus.

As expected, the Greek side ignored Erdoğan's remarks. The Greek minister, George Gerapetritis, reiterated the "united Cyprus" position. Gerapetritis stressed the importance of forming a single state with a bizonal federation on the basis of the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.⁶

Nevertheless, it is important that positive momentum has been recorded in Greek-Turkish relations.⁷

The Eastern Mediterranean

Due to the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves, the maritime sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean especially around Cyprus and the Greek island of Kastellorizo emerged as another crucial problem between the two states.

The geopolitical arena of the Eastern Mediterranean is evolving into a delicate balancing act. Turkey, for its part, neglected the creation of a credible presence in this region. Today, by expanding its navy fleet and demonstrating power there, Ankara seeks to fill the gaps and strengthen its hand. On the other hand, contrary to Ankara, Athens invests in its multilateral relations with the countries in the region, which has isolated Turkey.

Greece has prioritized the restoration of relations with Israel, including through tripartite initiatives with Egypt and Jordan, and worked to build ties with the majority of the Western Balkan states⁸ - such as Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. This constructive multilateral policy bolsters Greece's image as a country that contributes to regional stability.

Turkey's change of attitude and the improvement in its relations with Egypt and Israel, as well as improving the climate of the Greek-Turkish relationship, on the occasion of the "earthquake diplomacy", created a positive environment and a new balance of power in the region. Today, Ankara is trying to revive its "Zero problems with the neighbors" policy.⁹

The Eastern Mediterranean acquires its own special importance in the context of the energy rearrangements taking place in the region; namely, against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Greece had already begun to turn into an energy hub from the end of 2018.¹⁰ Athens has long projected its ambition to function as a bridge between the Middle East and Europe. Thanks to the agreements that are progressing rapidly involving Israel and Egypt, which included plans for the Republic of Cyprus, the Greek government managed to receive the blessings of the US administration. In addition, this proactive multilateralism led to the recent G-20 summit sponsoring the idea of an energy route via India – UAE -- Saudi Arabia – Jordan – Israel – Greece.¹¹

This redesign of the energy roads is something with which Turkey wants to be directly involved in order to secure its own share. Time will tell if Greece and Turkey will find a common ground on this matter.

Aegean Sea – Greek islands' armament – Arms Race

Due to the geographical proximity of the Greek islands to Turkish shores, both sides declared 6 miles (approximately 10 km) of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea. According to International Law, customary and conventional norms (and as reflected by the new Convention of 1982, Article 3), like all states, Greece has the right to expand its territorial waters from 6 miles to 12 miles (20 km). Parallel to that, in the Black Sea and on its coast along the Mediterranean, Turkey has applied a coastal zone of 12 nautical miles.



The map on the left: The Eastern Mediterranean according to Greece and Cyprus
 The map on the right: The Eastern Mediterranean according to Turkey
 Both Maps are from the website of [Prio Cyprus Center](http://www.prio-cyprus-center.org).

Despite this widely international accepted custom, the Turkish administration regards the Aegean Sea as an extraordinary case. To deter Greece from declaring 12 miles of territorial waters, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (1995) declared any unilateral Greek decision on this matter as *casus belli*. Turkey claims that it is concerned about the possibility of "being strangled" by the transformation of the Aegean into a "Greek lake".¹² The unilateral Greek decision will expand the Aegean Greek territorial waters from 43.5 percent to 71 percent. On the other hand, Turkey's share will only rise from 7.5 percent to just 8.8 percent. It is a fact that any expansion would have significant consequences for the range of international waters, as well as for sea routes used by international navigation. For this reason, Greece particularly emphasizes the right of safe passage of commercial and warships.

After the Imia (Kardak) crisis (1996), where Turkey disputed Greece's sovereignty over the two islets east of Kalymnos, the Turkish side has maintained the position that in the Aegean there are gray zones of sovereignty that include at least 100 small islands, some of which are inhabited (such as Agathonisi and Farmakonisi). According to Ankara, the status of these islands is disputed and must be determined through negotiations.

Turkey accuses Greece of having fortified Lemnos, Samothraki, and the Dodecanese (Twelve Islands) in violation of the Treaties of [Lausanne \(1923\)](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/doc/3a6b1b1b) and Paris (1947) which call for absolute demilitarization. As for the islands of Ikaria, Samos, Lesbos, Chios, a regime of partial demilitarization applies. Unsurprisingly, Greece rejects the Turkish stance by claiming that the relevant provisions on Lemnos and Samothraki islands in the Treaty of Lausanne have been annulled by the [Montreux Convention \(1936\)](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/doc/3a6b1b1b).

Regarding the Dodecanese, the Greek side argues that Turkey is not a contracting party to the Paris Peace Treaty and therefore is not entitled to enjoy the rights stemming from this agreement.

On the contrary, Greece considers that the concentration of the Turkish troops and amphibious means in the proximity of the Greek islands and the threatening statements of Turkish officials compel Greece to make the legitimate preparations that can be seen as an act of self-defense – as specified by Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.¹³

Conclusion

The bilateral relations between Athens and Ankara have been complicated over the last 60 years. Greece and Turkey have found themselves several times in a period of serious crisis, or even on the verge of war. Despite the rapprochement between the two sides after 1999, no substantial progress has been made in the effort to fully normalize bilateral relations on the above-mentioned fundamental issues.

Positions on both sides have remained consistently solid and unyielding. With reference to the core disagreements, both sides should not impose suffocating timetables, since there is a clear road map that must be followed. The disagreements regarding the demarcation of maritime sovereignty both in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea are complex and cannot be resolved overnight, and meanwhile, “The Hague” is far away.

The Cyprus issue should be considered separately, due to the corresponding weight it holds as a subject for both countries. Greece does not accept discussion of a solution outside the existing UN framework and considers Turkey's insistence on seeking other options, that is, the recognition of the independence of the TRNC, as counterproductive.

The preservation of today's relatively good climate between Greece and Turkey is a starting point, with the hope that both newly elected leaders will initiate diplomatic meetings to approach the problems.

Considering this, perhaps the easiest way to launch a genuine rapprochement between the two countries would be by taking reciprocal steps initially to improve the conditions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul and the Muslim minority in the Western Thrace.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

George Karatasios is a doctoral candidate at Tel Aviv University's School of History. Mr. Karatasios holds a BA degree in History from Ionian University, Corfu, Greece and an MA degree in History & Political Science from the Department of Political Science and History, Panteion University, Athens, Greece.

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Notes

¹ “Βαρθολομαίος : Οι καλές σχέσεις Ελλάδας - Τουρκίας έχουν αντίκτυπο και στο Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο,” (Bartholomew: The good relations between Greece and Turkey also have an impact on the Ecumenical Patriarchate) March 13, 2022 <https://www.liberal.gr/epikairota/bartholomaivos-oi-kales-sheseis-elladas-toyrkias-ehoyntiktypo-kai-sto-oikoymeniko#!pid=webtv2> [Accessed: October 24, 2023].

² “On the legal status of religious communities in Turkey and the right of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul to use the adjective ‘ecumenical’,” European Commission for Democracy Through Law, March 15, 2010, Strasbourg, [https://insanhaklarimerkezi.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2015/08/01/CDL-AD\(2010\)005.pdf](https://insanhaklarimerkezi.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2015/08/01/CDL-AD(2010)005.pdf) [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

³ “Υπέρ της Τουρκίας ο χρόνος που περνά στο Κυπριακό,” (The time spent in the Cyprus conflict is against Turkey) DW, September 20, 2023

<https://www.dw.com/el/%CF%85%CF%80%CE%AD%CF%81-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85%CF%81%CE%BA%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82-%CE%BF%CF%87%CF%81%CF%8C%CE%BD%CE%BF%CF%82-%CF%80%CE%BF%CF%85-%CF%80%CE%B5%CF%81%CE%BD%CE%AC-%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF-%CE%BA%CF%85%CF%80%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%B1%CE%BA%CF%8C/a-66870814> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁴ “The Annan Plan,” UK Parliament, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmfa/113/11305.htm> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁵ “Turkey accuses UN of losing its neutrality in Cyprus road spat,” *Times of Israel*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkey-accuses-un-of-losing-its-neutrality-in-cyprus-road-spat/> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁶ “Γεραπετρίτης: «Φρένο» σε Ερντογάν για την Κύπρο – ‘Καμία περίπτωση για λύση δύο κρατών’” (Gerapetritis: “Brake” to Erdogan for Cyprus - “No case for a two-state solution”), in *Newspaper*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.in.gr/2023/09/20/politics/diplomatia/freno-gerapetriti-se-erntogan-gia-tin-kyprio-kamia-periptosi-gia-lysi-dyo-kraton/> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁷ “Συνάντηση Μητσοτάκη- Ερντογάν: «Χρειάζεται χρόνος για ΑΟΖ και υφαλοκρηπίδα,” (Mitsotakis-Erdogan meeting: “Time is needed for EEZ and continental shelf”) *I Nafteboriki*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/politics/1516209/synantisi-mitsotaki-erntogan-chreiazetai-chronos-gia-aoz-kai-yfalokripida/> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁸ “Ελλάδα: Τους ηγέτες των Δυτικών Βαλκανίων προσκάλεσε την Δευτέρα ο Κυριάκος Μητσοτάκης,” (Greece: Kyriakos Mitsotakis invited the leaders of the Western Balkans on Monday) *Euronews*, August 18, 2023, <https://gr.euronews.com/2023/08/18/ellada-tous-igetes-ton-dytikon-balkanion-proskalese-o-kyriakos-mitsotakis> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

⁹ Gönül Tol, “Turkey’s Search for a ‘Zero Problem’ Policy,” *The Middle East Institute*, November 25, 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-search-zero-problem-policy> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

¹⁰ “Αποκρατικοποιήσεις και ΗΠΑ μετατρέπουν την Ελλάδα σε ενεργειακό κόμβο,” (Denationalization and the US are turning Greece into an energy hub) December 14, 2018, <https://www.euro2day.gr/news/economy/article/1654518/pos-oi-apokratikopoihseis-kai-oi-hpa-metatrepoun-s.html> [Accessed in: October 24, 2023].

¹¹ “Israel hypes India-Saudi-EU trade corridor, but it’s a bit player in US-China bout,” *The Times of Israel*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-hypes-india-saudi-eu-trade-corridor-but-its-a-bit-player-in-us-china-bout/> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].

¹² “Türkiye için "12 mil" savaş sebebi,” *DW*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiye-i%C3%A7in-12-mil-sava%C5%9F-sebebi/a-54754565> [Accessed in: October 19, 2023].

¹³ “Τουρκικοί ισχυρισμοί περί αποστρατικοποίησης των νησιών του Αιγαίου,” (Turkish claims about the demilitarization of the Aegean islands) Greek MFA, <https://www.mfa.gr/zitimata-ellinotourkikon-sheseon/aidikotera-keimena/tourkikoi-ishirismoi-apostratikopoiisis-nison-aigaiou.html> [Accessed in: October 3, 2023].