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**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH
AFRICA AND GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM AND SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE
ENVIRONMENT AND CYBER**

**HEARING ON “OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:
EXAMINING U.S. INTERESTS AND REGIONAL COOPERATION”**

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Chairman Deutch, Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Wilson, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick,
and Honorable Members of the Subcommittees,

Thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing.

The Eastern Mediterranean is a term that has emerged in common usage only in the last decade or so. It became an important concept as issues in Europe and the Middle East began to merge. Three developments were primary in this regard: 1) major natural gas finds off-shore in Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus in the years 2009, 2011, and 2015, respectively; 2) Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria, which marked the first post-Soviet return of Russia to the Middle East and gave it a base for injecting proxies into Libya and sub-Saharan Africa; and 3) Turkey’s emergence as an aggressive, interventionist power in the Arab Middle East, as well as the Aegean and Mediterranean, with expansive claims to a coastal shelf extending far to its south and west while refusing to accord any meaningful EEZ to Cyprus and none whatsoever to the Greek islands. Particularly in recent years, these developments have been playing out against the backdrop of a real and regionally perceived drawdown of US forces in the region.

These developments have led to intensified conflict in the region but also some instances of unprecedented cross-regional cooperation and the prospect of opportunities to advance US interests. For example, Hellenic states Greece and Cyprus have taken the initiative to form separate trilateral groupings with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and India. These “trilaterals” form the potential core of far wider trans-regional, cooperative ventures. Another significant cross-regional grouping is the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), chaired and initiated by Egypt, whose Zohr gas field is the Eastern Med’s largest. Mostly a talk-shop so far, the EMGF is envisioned to enhance regional cooperation in energy development. Perhaps its most interesting aspect is its membership: 3 EU states (Greece, Cyprus, Italy), 2 Arab states (Egypt and Jordan), Israel, and the Palestinian Authority. France and the US are observers.

Of the Hellenic-initiated trilateral groups, the one that has received the most attention is the one that includes Israel. It is also the most institutionalized of the groups, with frequent ministerials, a host of common economic projects, and a secretariat in Nicosia. Begun in 2016 and supplemented by the US when Secretary of State Pompeo joined its ministerial in 2019, it

became known as the “3+1.” It was enshrined in The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which appropriated funds to the Economic Support Fund for “for joint dialogues in support of the Eastern Mediterranean Partnership,” defined by House Report 116-444 as “an annual joint dialogue in the United States with Israel, Greece, and Cyprus.” It was further formalized three months ago in the NDAA for FY22, calling for a “3+1 parliamentary group,” specifying that six parliamentarians from each of the four nations meet annually – a relatively rare type of gathering. I do note that the legislation says the US Congress will be represented by six “Senators.” I do hope the legislation will be amended at some point to allow for the participation of House Members as well.

The Biden Administration has endorsed the “3+1” concept, but has yet to hold a joint ministerial with the three. Based on conversations with their representatives, I believe “the three” are eager for that meeting to take place.

What makes the 3+1 particularly noteworthy and deserving of strong US support is that it groups the three most democratic states in the East Med. Moreover, this partnership has been endorsed by multiple ruling parties in each state, so it can truly be said to express a broad spectrum of the popular will and reflects a truly regional initiative. The Hellenic trilateral with Egypt, which began in 2014, largely mirrors that with Israel, if somewhat less developed.

Since 2014, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel have frequently participated in search-and-rescue exercises with the United States and others, albeit not under the umbrella of the trilateral or 3+1. Israel has also engaged in separate, bilateral exercises with Greece and Cyprus. For example, Greece is currently hosting the Iniochos 2022 aerial combat exercise with Austria, Canada, France, Italy, Slovenia, and the US, as well as Israel and Cyprus. Among the observers are four Middle Eastern states: Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia.

Greece has also reached out beyond the East Med to the Gulf, last year hosting a Saudi air force exercise on Crete as well as a diplomatic gathering it dubbed the Philia Forum, encompassing Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as Egypt and Cyprus.

On the operation side, Athens also last year loaned Saudi Arabia a Patriot battery, along with a deployment of about 130 troops to operate it, incurring Iran’s ire. In 2020, Athens and Abu Dhabi signed a military cooperation agreement with “Article 5”-type overtones. In August of that year, during a period Greek-Turkish tensions, the UAE deployed four F-16s to Crete.

On the southern side of the East Med, everyone is familiar with Israel’s growing relations with Gulf states Bahrain and UAE. This was dramatized the other day when Egyptian President Sisi, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and Israeli Prime Minister Bennett met in Sharm al-Shaykh.

There are other examples of this cross-regional cooperation, and virtually all of it done at regional initiative, without US importuning. (The Abraham Accords may be a partial exception in that regard, although the parties did have longstanding unofficial ties before the US offered the

final sweeteners.) In many cases, these initiatives were sparked by concern that the US was departing the region.

The key message in all of this is that the old regional borders are less rigid. The map is changing, and the US, without excessive investment, can shape it.

Russia's war: Implications

There is no doubt that the Russian war on Ukraine potentially scrambles the situation in the East Med. First, getting East Med gas to Europe is now more relevant than ever. Increased gas prices may also make its extraction more feasible, provided potential investors are convinced high prices will last for a while.

The war also sharpens the rivalry between Russia and the West in a manner still to play out. Russia could emerge a more difficult neighbor for the US, Turkey, and/or Israel in the Syrian arena, for example. A weakened Russia, however, may draw down its involvement in Syria as well as in Libya.

The war between two Black Sea states is certainly a reminder of Turkey's importance, but, at least heretofore, it doesn't alter the dynamics of Turkey's balancing act between NATO and the West, on one hand, and Russia, on the other. In fact, it may reinforce Turkey's ambivalence. Broadly, Turkey has applied the same template to this crisis that it applied to Russian regional aggressions in 2008 and 2014 – siding with the West rhetorically while refusing to apply sanctions on Russia. In this case, there are some additional wrinkles to its approach: selling armed drones to Ukraine, keeping its airspace open to Russian aircraft, and de facto closing the Straits to both “riparian” (i.e., Russian) and “non-riparian” (i.e., NATO) military vessels, all the while putting itself forward as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. Taken together, Turkey appears still to be trying to balance its relations between Russia, with which it now has considerable equities at stake, and the West. For the US, it's worth exploring whether developments in the war will lead Turkey at least to tilt decisively toward the West, but so far there is no definitive sign of it.

Recommendations

- 1) Intensify US diplomatic involvement across the board with friendly states and friendly clusters of states – and try to merge these clusters to the extent possible. This includes the various Hellenic trilaterals, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, and the various partnerships between Eastern Med and Gulf states. What many of these states yearn for is a stepped-up US military presence in the East Med, but they also crave diplomatic leadership. Direct involvement with these clusters will reinforce the US' ability to shape the strategic outlook and key strategic decisions taken by members of the clusters. Decisions such as those that led to Chinese involvement with Piraeus and Haifa ports would be far less likely were the US intimately involved with these cross-regional sub-groups. In short, create “plus-one's” wherever possible.

As noted, some of these clusters emerged based on a common perception that the US is downsizing in the region. In that sense, they are organic, which is positive. That doesn't mean they wouldn't welcome US guidance and leadership, however.

Another advantage is that overlap among these clusters create possibilities for merging activities. It's no secret that the cold but crucial peace between Israel and Egypt has warmed just a bit in recent years, thanks to energy deals, the Abraham Accords, and other factors. US involvement as a "plus-one" in the trilaterals that Greece and Cyprus have formed separately with Israel and Egypt enhance the possibility of greater Israeli-Egyptian normalization. We saw an indication of this the other day, when the Egyptian foreign minister joined the Abraham Accords foreign ministers in Sde Boker, Israel. Without the presence of Secretary of State Blinken, I believe this would not have been possible. More open Israeli-Egyptian cooperation is an important US interest, because it reinforces the 43-year-old Israeli-Egyptian peace, which is the foundation stone of what stability exists in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it increases the prospect of overt security-related activities involving Egypt and Israel.

Given the cross-regional nature of many of these clusters, the US should consider appointing a Special Representative for the Eastern Mediterranean, or at least consider how to fill in the seam between the Near Eastern Affairs and the European Affairs Bureaus, where many of these issues reside.

- 2) It is highly desirable for Turkey to be firmly in the Western camp, and the US should continue to give thought as to how to effect that. However, given Turkish equivocation in recent years, the US should continue to hedge its bets in that regard by building and expanding military facilities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece. I visited Greece in November as part of the Middle East Task Force of the Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs, or JINSA. A number of retired senior US military leaders, including former SACEUR Philip Breedlove, were on that trip, and I think all of us were impressed with the eagerness of Greek military and elected officials for expanded military cooperation with the US. That's a dramatic turnaround from Greek attitudes of less than twenty years ago. With the signing of Military Defense Cooperation Agreements in 2019 and 2021, both left-wing and center-right governments have affirmed this attitude. As the report of the JINSA Task Force points out, the eastern Mediterranean is a crossroads of three continents, and Greece is at the center of that crossroads. As such, it can be a power-projection platform for much of the region, a role that Turkey has become increasingly reluctant to play in this century. Also, thanks to new US-access facilities at Alexandroupoli port, and an anticipated expansion of the rail system, NATO would be able to bypass logjams – or, in the current case, closures – in the Straits and transport men and materiel overland to Bulgaria, Romania, and even Ukraine, faster than is possible through the Straits.
- 3) The US should consider how it can support expansion of the LNG facilities at Damietta and Idku in Egypt and development of the planned re-gasification unit in Alexandroupoli, Greece. Natural gas discoveries in Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt brought to life the concept of

the Eastern Med, and, from the beginning, there was hope that East Med gas could contribute to the weaning of Europe off Russian gas. There should be no illusions as to what the potential 10 bcm or so from the East Med can do to replace the more than 150 bcm that Europe annually imports from Russia, but every little bit helps. Politically, the LNG route – Egypt-to-Greece – seems to be the most immediately practical route and the one that can be activated most rapidly.

The proposed East Med Gas Pipeline (Israel-Cyprus-Greece-Italy) probably isn't feasible due to expense and difficulty of engineering. The proposed Turkish-Israeli pipeline isn't politically feasible, barring a solution to the Cyprus problem. That pipeline would traverse Cyprus' EEZ. Israel has said it would do nothing in its resuscitated relations with Turkey that would undermine its ties with Greece or Cyprus; attempting to build a pipeline to Turkey across Cyprus' EEZ certainly would have that effect.

- 4) Re-double efforts to solve the Cyprus problem, including with the appointment of a Special Cyprus Coordinator, a post that existed as a distinct position from the late 1970s through the failure of the Annan Plan in 2004. There are more than a half-dozen hot conflicts and acute crises in the Eastern Med, not to mention transnational problems such as terrorism and migration. But the unsolved, trans-regional diplomatic problem that probably blocks the most avenues of East Med cooperation is Cyprus. Were the Cyprus problem solved, there might already have been a pipeline carrying Israeli and Cypriot gas to Turkey for onward piping to Europe. There would be no aggressive Turkish actions to block Cypriot exploration activities in its Economic Exclusion Zone. And a unified Cyprus might well be a member of NATO rather than a potential source of conflict between NATO members Greece and Turkey. It is obviously a difficult and complicated problem – made no easier by Turkey's and the Turkish Cypriots' current insistence on a "two-state" solution as well as the opening of Varosha – but it is important that the US continue to push for a solution. The problem has been frozen for decades, but the stakes are too high simply to allow the problem to fester. At some point, for its own sake, Turkey is going to have to accept the existence of the Republic of Cyprus, which is not only a member of the EU but which also has a growing network of regional and international ties.
- 5) It's time to return to Presidential-level dialogue with Turkey, at least regarding the Russian war on Ukraine. President Biden deserves significant credit for his handling of relations with Erdogan, which has contributed to a calming of Turkish behavior since he took office. An important element of this has been his relative "cold shoulder" to Turkey's President, who became overly used to easy telephone access to the President of the United States during the past two administrations and, based on his bilateral conduct, inferred an inflated view of his, and Turkey's, importance to the U.S. as a result. This message was certainly driven home – if it hadn't been already – by Biden's decision to spurn Erdogan's widely reported interest in meeting with him on the margins of the NATO summit last week. However, given Turkey's important relations with both Russia and Ukraine and its role as the leading facilitator of Russian-Ukraine talks – as well as Erdogan's dominance of Turkish foreign policy and his penchant for taking things personally – occasional Presidential-level

diplomacy would likely be useful. The war may present an opportunity to move Turkey to the NATO side of the fence. Elsewhere in this testimony, I expressed skepticism regarding this possibility, but wars sometimes change things, and this war isn't over yet. It's worth exploring at the Presidential level.