



Will the Eastern Mediterranean Become the Next Persian Gulf?

By Niklas Anzinger

For more than two decades, the United States has placed the issue of Eastern Mediterranean maritime security on the backburner. But the 2010 discovery of what may potentially be 3,450 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil in the Eastern Mediterranean's Levant Basin brings that region's security to the forefront. Turkey and Cyprus have competing interests in tapping the newfound oil and gas and in defending their access to those resources, while Israel and Lebanon continue to dispute their shared maritime boundary and territorial waters. Against this backdrop, political tensions are escalating in Egypt, Moscow seeks to expand its influence in Syria, and Iran continues to facilitate terrorist activities through its aides in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. Current US force posture in the Persian Gulf reflects the type of investment that may become necessary in the Eastern Mediterranean as conflicts loom: establishing cooperative security sites with favorable geographic locations, building on-call operating facilities, and establishing pre-agreements with the host nations that permit the US military to utilize the sites.

The United States has for more than two decades taken Eastern Mediterranean maritime security for granted. The 1978 Camp David Accords ended the state of war between Egypt and Israel, and the fall of the Soviet Union diminished Moscow's influence in the region. The triangular relationship between the United States, Israel, and Turkey also provided a foundation of stability.¹ But with the recent discovery of vast oil and gas deposits in the region, the Eastern Mediterranean is in flux.

In 2010, the US Geological Survey estimated that the Eastern Mediterranean's Levant Basin—which is surrounded by Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Cyprus—may hold up to 3,450 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil, putting it on par—at least when it comes to natural gas resources—with onshore lands and state waters off the Gulf Coast of the

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Key points in this Outlook:

- The United States has long taken Eastern Mediterranean maritime security for granted, but the 2010 discovery of vast oil and gas deposits in the region's Levant Basin is eliciting competition over exclusive economic zones among countries such as Israel, Cyprus, Turkey, and Lebanon.
- The naval activities of Iranian-backed terrorist groups, Russia's quest to expand its international influence, Turkey's over-confident posture, and political unrest in Syria and Egypt have collectively exacerbated tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.
- As Eastern Mediterranean security becomes increasingly important, the United States must bolster its force posture in the region by establishing new cooperative security sites and by helping develop a regional defense partnership.

United States.² The Cypriot government believes it alone has 1,770 bcm of natural gas within its territorial waters.³

While Saudi Arabia and Alaska are richer in gas and oil, the Levantine gas fields' proximity to shore and to the European markets make it attractive to many investors.⁴ A number of American and European companies work in the region. Houston-based Noble Energy Inc., for example, has started production in Israel's offshore Leviathan field, and may soon exploit smaller fields nearby.⁵

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The gas fields have already begun to reorient strategic alliances. For instance, the prospect of economic cooperation between Israel and Cyprus has led to their diplomatic reconciliation.⁶ In February 2012, Benjamin Netanyahu became the first Israeli prime minister to make an official visit to the island nation, just 175 miles off Israel's shore. The two governments are now considering laying a Cypriot-Israeli pipeline through the Greek island of Crete to the European markets or building a shared liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant at Vassiliko on Cyprus's southern shore.⁷ Netanyahu and Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias signed agreements to enable Israel to use Cypriot airfields and to protect Cypriot gas fields.

But security concerns loom over development plans, as certain exclusive economic zones (EEZs) are disputed. Ankara's recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the northern third of the island muddies Cyprus's EEZ. Israel and Lebanon likewise dispute their maritime boundary, and Palestinians claim a gas field off the Gaza Strip. Unrest in Egypt and Syria and the activities of Iranian-sponsored terrorist groups only further threaten security.

Every US president since Richard Nixon has declared "energy independence" a US goal.⁸ For the first time in generations, extraction technologies make this goal

attainable.⁹ The United States has already become self-sufficient in gasoline and natural gas; it may well become self-sufficient in oil by 2030 and an exporter of oil a decade later.¹⁰ However, much of the industrialized world remains dependent on Middle Eastern oil. Even if the United States does not import oil or gas directly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Qatar, the fungibility of prices means that Persian Gulf disruptions adversely impact the US economy. Should Israel and Cyprus develop the oil and gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe could potentially reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern oil and Russian gas.

Turkish Turmoil

Much as Iran and Saudi Arabia dominate the Persian Gulf, simple geography makes Turkey a paramount player in the Eastern Mediterranean. While the Persian Gulf littoral states, with few exceptions, profit from gas or oil, Turkey lacks indigenous energy resources. It has instead sought to cash in on its geographical position, which links the energy-rich Caspian Sea region to the energy-hungry West.¹¹

As new gas fields are identified in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey is not only loath to lose its position as an energy hub but it also seeks its own cut of the action. Ankara has used the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—a proxy state formed after Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus and recognized only by Ankara—to dispute sovereignty over Cypriot gas and oil fields. Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız said in March 2013 that the Turkish government would suspend businesses that are involved in Cyprus—such as the Italian oil and gas company Eni—from working on projects in Turkey.¹²

After Noble Energy Inc. began drilling for oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean in September 2011, Turkey's European Union Affairs Minister Egemen Bağış threatened to use military force against Cyprus. "This is what we have the navy for," he declared, adding, "We have trained our marines for this; we have equipped the navy for this. All options are on the table; anything can be done."¹³ The same month, the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Company conducted an exploration drill under Turkish armed escort close to Greek Cypriot waters.¹⁴

Bağış and Yıldız may not be among Turkey's most diplomatically refined officials, but it would be negligent to ignore their threats. Given its embrace of Hamas and agitation against Israel, the United States can no

longer assume Turkey will help encourage stability in the region. In March 2012, the Turkish government introduced a five-year strategic plan to make the country's defense industry one of the world's 10 largest by 2016, which reflects the ruling Justice and Development Party's ambition to wean Turkey out of the US and European orbits.¹⁵

The Turkish administration views not only Israel and Cyprus as threats, but also Russia.¹⁶ And Turkey is well positioned to defend itself: it retains the strongest navy in the region, with a 200-ship mix of frigates, corvettes, tactical submarines, fast-attack craft, amphibious vessels, and logistics ships, and has a fleet command at Gölcük on the Sea of Marmara.¹⁷

Russia's Quest for Power Projection

Turkey is not the only country looking anew at an Eastern Mediterranean presence. In 1967, Moscow formed the 5th Operational Squadron in the Mediterranean to counterbalance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US Sixth Fleet. The 5th Operational Squadron remained in the region until 1992, when it withdrew after the Soviet Union's fall.¹⁸

In May 2013, against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a new Russian taskforce comprised of 16 warships and support vessels to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹ Russian officials announced plans to make this task force a permanent presence in the region and to set up headquarters, perhaps in the Syrian port of Tartous, which may have become a hub for Russian supply of heavy weaponry to the Syrian government during Syria's civil war.²⁰ Certainly Putin seeks to return Russia to superpower status and believes Russia should have the same ability to project power that the Soviet Union did.²¹

What the Kremlin does not do directly, it seeks to do through client states. Bashar al-Assad's Syria enjoys Russian protection and weaponry. In May 2013, Russia reportedly equipped Assad with Yakhont shore-to-ship "sea-skimming" cruise missiles (P-800 Oniks).²² Russia's supplying of weaponry to the Eastern Mediterranean remains a destabilizing factor, especially since terrorists might seize Syrian arsenals should Assad fall.

Energy resources provide both the bulk of Moscow's revenues and Putin's chief geopolitical leverage.²³ In 2012, hydrocarbon exports accounted for at least half of Russia's budget.²⁴ Accordingly, Russia is loath to encourage the development of a network beyond its control.²⁵

This is also why Russia's state-owned energy giant Gazprom has bid for Cypriot and Israeli share contracts in LNG marketing to ensure Moscow's control over the flow from a future Mediterranean energy production center. Hence, Moscow seeks to use its leverage over Cyprus to increase Russian influence.²⁶

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The Israel-Lebanon Maritime Boundary

Lebanon's desperate need for cash—the country is \$55 billion in the red, equivalent to 175 percent of its gross domestic product—means that Lebanese exploration of offshore waters is inevitable. Already, Lebanese Admiral Nazih Baroudi has laid out a 10-year strategy that includes defense of offshore platforms.²⁷ While Kofi Annan, former secretary general of the United Nations, certified Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, the countries' maritime boundary and 330 square miles of territorial waters remain in dispute.²⁸

While oil or gas fields have yet to be unearthed in this area, seismic studies allude to the possibility of discovery. Politics, however, preclude settlement of the dispute between Lebanon and Israel.²⁹ Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese parliament and a close ally to Hezbollah, said in September 2012 that "we will not compromise on any amount of water from our maritime borders and oil, not even a single cup."³⁰ Moreover, a December 2012 US State Department initiative to settle the maritime border between Lebanon and Israel failed. Hezbollah may use the disputed waters to justify continued terrorism against Israel and, in turn, to provide an opportunity for Iran to further involve itself in the region.

Enter Iran

The Iranian government increasingly seeks to expand its naval reach. Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), has declared that Iran intends to extend "our security

borders to the East Mediterranean” and bragged that “deceptive ploys [by Israel and the United States] failed to stop our movement.”³¹ In February 2011, Iranian warships entered the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal for the first time since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.³²

Iranian activity in the Eastern Mediterranean poses security challenges to the United States and its allies and to offshore oil and gas infrastructure. Iran has made repeated attempts to smuggle weaponry into the Gaza Strip. On January 3, 2002, the Israeli navy captured the *Karine-A*, a ship loaded with 50 tons of Iranian weaponry bound for the Palestinian National Authority, the Hamas-led administration in the Gaza Strip.³³ This was the third attempted Iranian weapons shipment in less than a year.³⁴

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In recent years, Tehran has renewed its attempts to smuggle weaponry through the Mediterranean. On November 3, 2009, Israeli naval forces seized the MV *Francop*, a cargo ship reportedly carrying 320 tons of weapons from Iran bound for the Lebanon’s Hezbollah branch.³⁵ Furthermore, in March 2011, Israel intercepted a ship carrying weaponry that was intended to be delivered to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.³⁶ And in August 2012, an Iranian frigate and cruiser transited the canal and docked in the Syrian port of Latakia.³⁷

Iranian-supplied weaponry poses a threat to international shipping, including commercial and military freights. During its 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah crippled the Israeli warship *INS Hanit*, which was cruising eight to nine miles offshore, with an Iranian version of the Chinese C-802 missile.³⁸ Israeli army intelligence suspects Hezbollah has acquired M-600s, Syrian-guided missiles modeled after Iran’s Fateh A-110 that have a range of 160 miles.³⁹ Hezbollah may also maintain an amphibious sabotage and coastal infiltration unit. Recruits may receive training in an IRGC underwater combat school in Bandar Abbas and in a camp near the Assi River in the northern Bekaa Valley.⁴⁰

Both the Iranian Navy and the IRGC Navy have extended their operations to the Sea of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea, and Sudan appears ready to allow

Iran to use its naval base at Port Sudan.⁴¹ A Sudanese base would allow Iran to extend its reach if not into the Mediterranean itself, then into the northern Red Sea. Should Iranian shipping become more frequent in the Red Sea, the risk of IRGC Navy operations, mining, and commando operations will increase and also become possible in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴²

The Rise and Fall of the Muslim Brotherhood

The 1978 Camp David Accords ended the state of war between America’s two chief allies in the Eastern Mediterranean and brought a modicum of security to the region. Israel achieved border security and Egypt gained control of the Suez Canal. While diplomatic relations between Cairo and Jerusalem remained cool, the two countries cooperated economically. In 2005, Israel and Egypt built, under a 20-year contract, a 60-mile subsea pipeline from gas fields in the northern Sinai Peninsula to Ashkelon, Israel.⁴³

After the February 2011 ouster of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, however, a security vacuum in the Sinai resulted in 15 pipeline attacks. Islamist groups mobilized against Israel and pressured the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company to cancel the 20-year contract, even as Egyptian hard currency reserves dwindled.⁴⁴

Terrorism in the Sinai continues to challenge Israeli-Egyptian military cooperation. On August 18, 2011, 12 terrorists dressed as Egyptian soldiers attacked a civilian bus near Eilat close to the Sinai border, killing 8 Israelis and wounding 30. Israel’s retaliation killed five Egyptian policemen and soldiers.⁴⁵ On September 9, protestors attacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo and demanded that Egypt scrap the Camp David Accords.

President Mohammed Morsi’s July 3, 2013, ouster may exacerbate instability. In the wake of the Egyptian coup, Morsi supporters clashed with troops in both Suez and Ismailia alongside the Suez Canal, through which 8 percent of seaborne trade passes.⁴⁶ Not only the Muslim Brotherhood but also other radical groups have begun to resist the Egyptian military. Further instability could threaten Suez Canal shipping more than any event since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

Defense in the Eastern Mediterranean

In January 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu described the offshore gas fields in the Levant Basin as a “strategic

objective that Israel's enemies will try to undermine" and vowed that "Israel will defend its resources."⁴⁷ Israel's Mary-B and Noa fields are in range of Gaza-based Hamas missiles, and the Leviathan and Tamar fields are within Hezbollah's range. For this reason, in April 2013, Israel's navy requested a one-time budget increase of \$760 million to assemble new forces to protect the gas fields.⁴⁸

Still, the Israeli Navy has to overcome significant challenges to adequately secure its new interests. At present, the Israeli Navy can patrol and conduct basic coastal defense, but with just 3 corvettes, 10 missile boats, 3 operational submarines, and 42 patrol boats, the naval fleet remains too small for wider sustained missions.⁴⁹ The navy will need to conduct round-the-clock surveillance to protect against gunboats and suicide maritime attacks targeting infrastructure far off Israel's shore. This will also require more than just new ships. In recent months, Israel has also installed a Barak-8 anti-air and anti-missile naval defense system to protect production rigs.⁵⁰

Israel maintains air superiority to deter conventional naval attacks. However, because Turkey has promised to use its membership in international organizations to hinder broader cooperation with Israel, NATO may not be the platform upon which to base Eastern Mediterranean defense.⁵¹ Because NATO operates by consensus, Turkey has an effective veto over any NATO cooperation with Israel. There is no indication that Turkey plans to end its attempts to isolate Israel any time soon.

Turkish behavior may mandate that the United States act independently from NATO. The United States has acted similarly in the past: in 2012, the US Navy supported joint Greek-Israeli naval exercises to signal its disfavor with Turkey's isolation of Israel.⁵²

The Case for a New US Force Posture

If protecting freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and safeguarding American allies among the gulf's littoral states is a US interest, then certainly security within the Eastern Mediterranean will become increasingly important over the next decade. US force posture in the Persian Gulf reflects the type of investment that may become necessary in the Eastern Mediterranean. The US Navy has for more than two decades kept at least one carrier strike group in the Persian Gulf at all times, with another nearby in the Arabian or Red Seas.⁵³ In addition, the US military maintains a number of other facilities: a naval base and

regional headquarters in Bahrain; an army base in Kuwait; and a combined air operations center and a US Air Force Central Command forward-deployed headquarters in Qatar.⁵⁴

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So should the United States replicate in the Eastern Mediterranean a presence similar to that which it maintains in the Persian Gulf? Former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld was right when he argued, "We should take advantage of advanced capabilities that allow us to do more with less. The old reliance on presence and mass reflects the last century's industrial-age thinking."⁵⁵

The US Sixth Fleet, headquartered in Naples, Italy, commands frigates, destroyers, and aircraft carriers transiting from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.⁵⁶ American forces in Europe have a threefold base structure, with main operating bases, forward-operating sites, and cooperative security sites. The main operating base for naval forces is in Rota, Spain, a small port on the Atlantic Coast just outside the Strait of Gibraltar. In 2011, Souda Bay, Crete, became a forward-operating site for the US Navy to support US and NATO contingency operations.⁵⁷ An effective US Eastern Mediterranean defense posture needs new cooperative security sites that have favorable geographic locations and on-call operating facilities and that are based on pre-agreements with the host nations that permit the US military to utilize the sites.⁵⁸

Israel might host US forces in Haifa, the most frequent port of call for US Sixth Fleet service members. The US Department of State and Pentagon might also negotiate a naval security site in Limassol, Cyprus. The British maintain a Permanent Joint Headquarter in 98-square-mile Sovereign Base Areas in Akrotiri—close to Limassol—and in Dhekelia, which they use for electronic intelligence gathering and communications.⁵⁹

Greece and Britain could join a US-led "Eastern Mediterranean Defense Partnership" designed to ensure Israel's and Cyprus' exploration rights and seaborne defense against threats from nearby littoral states and terrorism from the Middle East. It is essential that the US government convince Greece and Cyprus that the

United States, United Kingdom, and Israel can guarantee their diplomatic and economic interests more than Russia and the Arab Middle East.

The Eastern Mediterranean in 2023 will look far different than the Eastern Mediterranean in 2013. The United States must be ready for this outcome.

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