

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2022/23

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## From Sea to Shining Sea: The Reorientation of Turkish Foreign Policy in 2022

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2022 was a year that redefined Turkey's regional role. In a relatively short time, it was transformed from a regionally destabilizing force in the Eastern Mediterranean to a force for relative stability across the wider region. This shift came after a period in which Turkey went knocking on the doors of the U.S. administration and strenuously courted states in the Middle East with closer relations to the United States, namely Israel, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates,<sup>1</sup> in order to rehabilitate its relationship with Washington while receiving a reception that can be characterized as somewhere between cautious and chilly. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the severe crises triggered by the prolongation of the war provided a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Turkey to improve its geopolitical standing. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration grabbed this opportunity with both hands and took action as the new circumstances required. Whereas Turkey in the summer of 2020 was supposedly the local troublemaker of the Mediterranean region,<sup>2</sup> Turkey in the fall of 2022 was the responsible adult of the Black Sea basin region. Nevertheless, Turkey's reorientation is determinedly not a strategic shift in its approach to its role in the Middle East and beyond, nor has it abandoned its maritime boundary demands.

### Turkey's reorientation and NATO

Russia's invasion of Ukraine dramatically improved Turkey's position in NATO, not least because of its critical strategic position. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, had announced the closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian warships and thus restricted the Russian Navy's activities in the Black Sea. Thus, not only did Turkey bolster its position as a key NATO member, with the second-largest military in the alliance; but it also reinforced the 1936 Montreux Convention, which affirmed the status of the straits and of the Sea of Marmara as international waters and authorized Turkey to close them to warships during times of

<sup>1</sup> "[Turkey, UAE sign investment accords worth billions of dollars](#)", *Reuters*, November 24, 2021; Jonathan Lis, "[Bennett Thanks Turkey's Erdogan for Couple's Release in First Call Since 2013](#)", *Haaretz*, November 18, 2021; Salim Çevik, "[Erdogan's Endgame with Egypt](#)", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, August 6, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Omri Eilat and Ayal Hayut-man, "The Turkish Maritime Doctrine: Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan)," in Shaul Chorev and Ehud Gonen (eds.), *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2020/21* (Haifa: Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Center, University of Haifa, 2021), 187–195.

armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> Not only did the Erdoğan government, therefore, prove its dependability in upholding a convention that predated the United Nations; but it also positioned Turkey as a power that supported the international order, precisely as it was weakening. This came after a period in which Turkey aggressively challenged the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Another important factor in reinforcing Turkey's NATO membership has been the tightening of the alliance and its increasing relevance in the face of the concrete Russian threat to Europe. This process has led other nations to want to join it. Chief among them is Ukraine, which cannot join NATO because it is embroiled in an armed conflict, but the shifting attitudes of the traditionally cautious Finland and Sweden are no less dramatic. The right of every NATO member state to veto new admissions has automatically made Turkey the kingmaker on the subject of Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO.<sup>4</sup> This situation has given Turkey clear leverage against the Kurdish immigrant lobby in Sweden, which has expressed enthusiasm for Kurdish separatism. Turkey achieved what it wished for when Sweden and Finland extradited 73 individuals considered by Turkey to be terror activists, most of them PKK members.<sup>5</sup> Turkey acted as the United States expected of it when it underscored the risks it was taking by standing up to Russia, and the admission of these new members is only one example.

### The ultimate mediator

Turkey's relations with Russia were extremely complicated even before the war in Ukraine. Both states' engagements in a host of theaters had sometimes brought them into direct confrontations. In Syria, cooperation between them was still possible, but the deviations were dramatic, even if they may be seen as accidents. One especially memorable incident was the downing of Russian military aircraft by Turkish jets. Tensions around Syria reached a boiling point again with the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey, along with the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers by Bashar al-Assad's forces with Russian arms and protection. Unlike in the case of Syria, Russia and Turkey found themselves on opposite sides of the Libyan Civil War from its outbreak, with Turkey supporting the Islamist Government of National Accord and Russia backing Egypt in its support for the forces of General Khalifa Haftar.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, "[Turkey warns against passing of warships from its straits](#)", March 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Lawless and Joseph Wilson, "[Turkey lifts its objections to Sweden, Finland joining NATO](#)", *AP News*, June 28, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Phelan Chatterjee, "[Who are 'terrorists' Turkey wants from Sweden and Finland?](#)", *BBC News*, July 5, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Remi Daniel, "[Turkish-Russian Relations: A Puzzle That Shakes the Middle East](#)", *Turkeyscope*, 5, no. 3 (2021).

In general, the conflicting interests in Libya and unavoidable collisions in Syria did not detract from Turkey's known tendency to rely on Russian support in cases of dissatisfaction with its cooperation with the United States. The S-400 deal with Russia and Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 project led Turkish-U.S. relations to a dead end and delivered a significant achievement to Russia's efforts to gain a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the complexities of geopolitics have not destabilized Turkish-Russian economic cooperation, especially in the energy sector, which both nations have a weighty interest in maintaining. Some 74 percent of Turkey's gas consumption comes from Russia via the Turk Stream and Blue Stream pipelines. Another important project whose significance extends far beyond the Turkish energy market is the establishment of the Akkuyu nuclear energy plant, with almost 100 percent funding from Russia's state energy corporation, Rosatom.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey has enjoyed extensive relations with Ukraine for thirty years. It recognized its statehood at the end of 1991, mere months after it declared independence. On the eve of the COVID-19 crisis, in 2019, Turkish-Ukrainian bilateral trade stood at over \$4 billion, and the investments and open projects of hundreds of Turkish companies were valued at over \$6 billion. Nevertheless, considering the current situation, the most significant deal that year was the sale to Ukraine of Bayraktar UAVs manufactured by a company owned by Erdoğan's son-in-law. According to the Ukrainian Government, it entered the war in late February 2022 with 20 of these drones; by the end of the summer of 2022, Ukraine was believed to possess at least 50. We know that these drones played a significant role in the sinking of the *Moskva* warship, which led to the relaxation of the naval blockade and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Snake Island. Turkey's aviation knowledge and the successful operational experience of the Bayraktar UAVs from the Azerbaijan-Armenian War of the summer of 2020 have given Ukraine a clear advantage in the field of UAVs against the Iranian-made UAVs acquired by the Russian military, which are nowhere as successful as the Bayraktar.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey's expansive and intricate ties with both sides, taken together with the significant rise in its standing within NATO, have made it a clear third party to this conflict. On the

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<sup>7</sup> Henri J. Barkey, "[Why There's No Easy Solution to the U.S.-Turkey Dispute Over the S-400](#)", *World Politics Review*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Elena Schislyaeva, Irina Evgrafova, Nadezhda Butakova, and Yuri Mishalchenko, "The EU – Russia – Turkey Energy Triangle: Legal and Economic Conditions of Gas Transportation via the TurkStream Pipeline", *Transportation Research Procedia*, 63 (2022): 1984–1990.

<sup>9</sup> Ragip Soylu, "[Ukraine received 50 Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones since Russian invasion](#)", *The Middle East Eye*, June 22, 2022; H. I. Sutton, "[Incredible Success of Ukraine's Bayraktar TB2: The Ghost of Snake Island](#)", *Naval News*, May 18, 2022.

one hand, it has condemned Russia's indiscriminate assaults on Ukrainian civilians; on the other, it has refrained from joining the United States and European Union's sanctions against Russia. This cautious position has made it the ultimate mediator between the sides. At the start of the war, there was a competition between Turkey and Israel over this status, but Turkey had many more overlapping interests with Russia and Ukraine, so it was much more suitable than Israel. Its biggest success as a mediator is the export corridor for Ukrainian wheat through the Black Sea, escorted by Turkish ships.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these developments leave no room for doubt: Turkey's primary domain has shifted from the Mediterranean Basin to the Black Sea.

### Europe's energy corridor

The sanctions that the United States and other Western nations imposed on Russia forced some of them at the start to grapple with the question of their dependence on Russian gas supplies, and then with disruptions to this supply. The most striking case was Germany, which is dependent on gas delivered through the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, with no possibility of finding an alternative supplier at such short notice. Importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) in tankers from the United States was one possible alternative, but far from enough to cover shortages in case the supply of Russian gas was cut off. Indeed, during the war, the deliberate sabotage of the two pipelines left Germany with no good options to procure gas. In contrast with this gloomy picture, Turkey offers Europe its most reliable energy corridor. Much of the gas that passes through Turkey comes from Russian sources, but it is supplemented by gas in pipelines from Azerbaijan, Iran, and Iraq. Turkey's desire to boost its status as Europe's energy corridor has guided its diplomatic efforts, including in the Mediterranean Basin.<sup>11</sup>

In March 2022, during President Isaac Herzog's visit to Turkey, Erdoğan devoted a large part of his speech to cooperation in the energy sector and went down into technical details about possible joint drilling operations.<sup>12</sup> Turkey's efforts to reconcile with Israel and the United Arab Emirates stem not only from a desire to become close again to the United States' most stalwart allies in the Middle East; Turkey itself suffered a serious gas shortage in the winter of 2021–2022, and its gas market suffers from a structural vulnerability given the cessation of the gas supply from Iran every winter.<sup>13</sup> Turkey hopes that purchasing gas from Israel through a pipeline to be laid across the exclusive economic

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<sup>10</sup> *Daily Sabah*, "[Turkey expects Black Sea grain corridor deal in writing this week](#)", July 20, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Kadri Tastan, "Turkey and European Security", *SWP Comment*, no. 38 (2022): 1–8.

<sup>12</sup> *Reuters*, "[Erdogan tells Israel's Herzog synergy in energy mutually beneficial – Turkish presidency](#)", April 1, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> *Financial Times*, "[Turkish industry hit by power cuts amid gas supply troubles](#)", January 24, 2022.

zones (EEZs) of Israel, Lebanon, and the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus will address this problem and safeguard its strategic position as Europe's southern energy corridor.

Turkey's opposition to the installation of the EastMed pipeline since 2018 is rooted in its historical conflict with Greece and Cyprus over their EEZs, but also in the fact that it would create an adjacent, rival energy corridor. Israel's rapprochement with the United Arab Emirates, which reached its peak with the Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, and the agreement to export Emirati petroleum through the Trans-Israel Pipeline were seen as a strategic challenge by Turkey, at minimum, and were understood as a step to undermine Turkey's position. Turkey's relations with the nations of the Eastern Mediterranean have shifted, not least with Israel and Egypt following the change of administrations in the United States at the start of 2021, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a more powerful impact on this process, deepening it further.

## The Rapprochement with Israel

Turkey sees Israel as a force that can traditionally open doors to U.S. administrations. Nevertheless, even if Turkey's reconciliation efforts with Israel in 2021 were partly an attempt to improve Ankara's standing with the U.S. administration, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's importance to the United States is clear in its own right. It does not need Israel in order to move more effectively through the hallways of Congress and the White House. The continuation of this trend is consistent with Turkey's renewed attempt to position itself as a Middle Eastern regional power by peaceful means.

The rise of the Bennett-Lapid government in Israel clearly removed an obstacle to Turkish-Israeli rapprochement. Then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was not actively involved in these rapprochement efforts and left them to President Herzog, who conducted the first official visit of its kind in a long time in Ankara at the start of March 2022. Still, then-Foreign Minister Yair Lapid advanced this process by visiting Ankara and hosting Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Israel in May 2022. As prime minister, Lapid met with Erdoğan at the U.N. General Assembly and completed the process of returning ambassadors to Ankara and Tel Aviv. The phone call between Erdoğan and Netanyahu after the latter's victory in Israel's November 2022 elections strengthens the trend of the full normalization of relations, but it is too early to declare a *fait-accompli*.<sup>14</sup> In any case, nobody currently disputes that Turkey's desire to draw closer to Israel is part of an organized policy and no mere whim.

<sup>14</sup> Lazar Berman, "[In first phone call since 2013, Netanyahu, Erdogan pledge to build 'new era' in ties](#)", *Times of Israel*, November 17, 2022.

This series of diplomatic visits began with Israel's announcement that, as a matter of principle, its rapprochement with Turkey would not come at the expense of its ties with its closest allies, Greece and Cyprus. This found expression in Herzog's visit to Greece before his visit to Turkey.<sup>15</sup> The Turkish government accepted this position, while Israel internalized the Turkish strategy of cooperating around shared interests, whatever their conflicting interests in other arenas. Despite the expulsion of members of Hamas's military wing from Istanbul, Turkey has continued to express great enthusiasm and interest in the Palestinian cause, and it sees Hamas as a legitimate party, and in the case of the AKP, even as a sister party, as a fellow part of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Another development that Turkey was watching the progress toward the signing of a maritime boundary agreement between Israel and Lebanon.<sup>16</sup> Its final ratification removed the last hurdle to start drilling operations in the Karish gas field. At this stage, Israel cannot export gas directly to Europe, doing so instead through liquefaction plants in Egypt. Still, the proliferation of drilling operations and active gas wells on the eastern shoreline of the Mediterranean has raised Turkish hopes for renewed negotiations (the last round failed in 2013) for the construction of a pipeline through Turkish territory, through which Israel and Lebanon will be able to export gas to Turkey itself or to European states through Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Turkey is also continuing to try to find a way to get involved directly in drilling the gas reserves along the Lebanese coast, and it has its eyes on the gas prospects in the Palestinian Authority's EEZ off the coast of the Gaza Strip. Israel, for its part, on the one hand, expects Turkey to halt its assistance to Hamas, and on the other hand, has consistently objected to the Turkish government's involvement in various mediation efforts ever since Erdoğan's first offer to Ehud Olmert to mediate the resolution of the conflict. The new chapter that has opened in Israeli-Turkish relations, short as it may yet be, involves Israel's acceptance of Turkey's relationship with Hamas, alongside Turkey's acceptance of Israel's close relations with Greece.

## Regular tensions: Turkey and Greece

The tensions along the maritime boundary between Turkey and Greece over the past year, during which it appeared on several occasions that the two nations would find themselves on the brink of war, are a variable that is independent of Turkey's relations with the broader international institutions to which they both belong. Despite the strengthening of NATO and the fact that both Turkey and Greece are member states, the conflict over

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<sup>15</sup> Tal Schneider, "[Herzog head to Greece for state visit as Turkey détente brews](#)," *Times of Israel*, 24 February, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> TRT Haber, "[Lübnan'dan İsrail ile deniz sınırı anlaşma taslağına dair açıklama](#)", October 10, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, "[Turkey Seeks Israeli Gas, but Politics Are in the Way](#)", *Haaretz*, November 3, 2013.

the maritime boundary between them continues to cause shockwaves. This maritime conflict predates the international organizations and arrangements designed to resolve such boundary disputes. It stems from the success of the European powers, chiefly the British Empire, in wresting control of the shipping lanes in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian/Arab Gulf from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The loss of Cyprus (to Britain in 1878), Crete (which united with Greece in 1908), and the Dodecanese (to Italy in 1911) in violation of the international guarantees given to the Ottoman Empire has been seen as a historic injustice by successive Turkish governments. It underpins Turkey's inbuilt suspicion of international institutions.<sup>18</sup> Turkey's historical attachment to the Black Sea is similarly linked to the same legacy of protracted Ottoman control of the entire basin, but unlike in the Aegean and Mediterranean, Turkey is a force for stability there, not a revisionist actor with demands of its own.

Even though Turkey has stopped regularly invoking its imperialistic Blue Homeland doctrine for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, its demands for a wider EEZ and its structural vulnerability resulting from the proximity of islands under Greek sovereignty along its shores remain unchanged. The dispute over Turkey's maritime boundaries has entailed a dispute over air space, as seen last year with the proliferation of violations on both sides and mutual accusations of provocations. While Turkey has worked to improve its relations with the White House, Greece enjoys unwavering support from the United States. This support received pronounced expression with the visit of Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, to Washington in May 2022, where he was received warmly and enthusiastically at Congress, where he delivered a speech, and at the White House, where he met with President Joe Biden. The improvement in Greek-U.S. relations under the Biden Administration adds another layer to Greece's membership of the European Union and its repeated claims that Athens is defending the borders of Europe. Greece frames its position in the European Union this way, and the new waves of refugees since the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan have kept these efforts intact in the face of Turkey's leverage against the institutions of the European Union as the main point of transit for refugees from Muslim states in Asia. Last summer, Greece started work to extend the border fence between it and Turkey from 40km (25 miles) to 120km (75 miles).<sup>19</sup>

The fact that both countries have entered an election year has heightened the combative rhetoric and both sides, playing an important role in both nations' local politics since

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<sup>18</sup> Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 4–7.

<sup>19</sup> Tasos Kokkinidis, "[Greece to Extend Fence Along the Entire Length of the Border with Turkey](#)", *Greek Reporter*, August 23, 2022.



backing or calming down would be interpreted by public opinion as weakness. This tension has increased concerns in the European Union of a possible Turkish invasion of Greece. Nevertheless, Turkey's threats to conquer Greece in a matter of days have come in tandem with an understanding that has trickled down in all states in the region, which are all looking at the Russian military's entanglement in Ukraine, that any country's invasion of its neighbor would lead to disastrous consequences for the invading power. Turkey is not as isolated nowadays as it was in late 2020, but precisely for this reason, it has much more to risk. Moreover, in addition to the disagreements and tensions, there exists a longstanding framework for dialogue between the two states, to which we must add infrastructure for dialogue between Erdoğan and Mitsotakis. In early October 2022, both leaders declared their openness to dialogue and conversation to reduce any tensions that might flare up in the near future.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkey's reorientation represents a natural shift that stems from its strategic thinking and critical position in the war in Ukraine, which the whole world has been watching since the start of 2022. Its activities over the past year have been based on both damage control and seizing opportunities in the context of the war. It would be a mistake to see Turkey's steps as heralding an irreversible long-term strategic shift. It has not taken a one-sided position against Russia, nor has it cut itself off from the United States or quit NATO over the crisis period of the past decade. Moreover, the improvement in its foreign relations has not at all alleviated the profound crisis of the Turkish economy, which remains a burning issue for its citizens and the most impactful for the country's fate in the coming years. The success of the Turkish arms exports market, even with the "seal of quality" lent by their operational experience, does not come close to covering the gaping hole in the Turkish economy, reflected in galloping inflation at the highest rates in the world (having risen from 36.1 percent at the start of 2022 to a record 85.5 percent in October of the same year) owing to the political management of the nation's economy.

Nevertheless, the change in Turkey's role is not a matter of whim, and it may be relied on to be stable in the near and medium terms. Bigger initiatives to guarantee the region's long-term stability will require all sides to compromise on historic issues, such as with a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or a resolution of the Cyprus issue and the Turkish-Greek maritime boundary. The eventual end of the war between Russia and Ukraine may incentivize Turkey to increase its demands, in recognition of its contribution

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<sup>20</sup> Okan Müderrisoğlu, "[Pursuing dialogue does not equate to weakness: Türkiye tells Greece](#)", *Daily Sabah*, October 20, 2022; *VOANews*, "[Greece Says It's Open to Talks with Turkey Once Provocations End](#)", October 2, 2022.

to minimizing the damages of the war, mediating between the warring parties, and maybe even ending the conflict altogether. Turkey's heightened attention to the Black Sea Basin is temporary and will not moderate its demands in the Mediterranean and Aegean. It would be prudent to take advantage of the present crisis that all the relevant parties find themselves in now to reach understandings that will prevent the conflict from flaring up in the future or that will at least tone it down.

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