

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

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## The Turkish Maritime Doctrine – The ‘Blue Homeland’ (Mavi Vatan)

### *Omri Eilat, Ayal Hayut-Man*

Since mid-2019, the Turkish navy has significantly expanded its activity in the Mediterranean. Among other things, ships of the Turkish navy have disrupted drilling and research activities in Cyprus’ EEZ and have engaged in such activities themselves; they have harassed Greece’s ships and since July 2020 have also demonstrated a presence off the Greek islands; and significant presence off the shores of Libya and have even provoked a confrontation with a French ship in that region. In March and May 2019, Turkey held two large-scale naval exercises, among the largest in its history. The first, which was called the ‘Blue Homeland’ (Mavi Vatan), took place in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean and involved more than 100 vessels. The second, which was called ‘Sea Wolf’ (Denizkurdu), took place in those same regions and included more than 130 ships and about 90 aircraft. These exercises included, among other things, a simulation of capturing islands—apparently Greek islands—and a confrontation with F16 planes, which are possessed in the East Mediterranean region only by Greece, Israel, and Egypt. These moves reflect Turkey’s new strategy, one put in place by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This is part of the strategic change in course that began more than a decade ago when Turkey decided to become a hegemonic power in the Middle East. The Turkish strategy includes activist principles of geopolitical and economic expansion, alongside defensive principles that were intended to rectify a historical injustice (in Turkey’s eyes) committed against the Turkish homeland by the international community. The strategic plan that dictates Turkey’s actions is called the ‘Blue Homeland.’ This is a doctrine that was first presented in 2006 by Turkish Admiral Cem Gürdeniz at a symposium held at the Turkish naval headquarters. According to the ‘Blue Homeland’, Turkey has the right to an enlarged maritime territory, measuring about 460 thousand square km, in the Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. This territory includes areas that are recognized as belonging to Greece and Cyprus EEZ’s according to international conventions.

The disagreement centers around the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in which a coastal nation has the right to exploit natural resources such as oil, natural gas and fisheries. According to the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), each country has the right to an EEZ of up to 200 nautical miles from its coast. This convention also defines the means and methods for delimiting the EEZ in cases where two countries have a claim on the same area. The main dispute between Turkey

and Greece concerning their EEZs is based on the fact that Greece has numerous islands, some of which border on Turkey, and according to the convention, every inhabitable island provides the right to the EEZ surrounding it. According to Turkey, islands should not be counted in determining the boundaries of an EEZ.

The historical position of Turkey, which is not exclusively due to the policy of the Erdoğan regime, is that the Convention for the Law of the Sea, which includes inhabitable islands in the delimitation of an EEZ, discriminates against Turkey by its very nature. The logic behind Turkish demands not to recognize the islands is related to Greece's control of the Cyclades, which extend all the way to the Turkish coast and is the result of the distortion that this situation creates given the dictates of the Convention for the Law of the Sea. The size of the disputed territory is about 145 thousand square km of economic waters, some of which may be rich in natural gas and oil deposits. Another source of conflict between Turkey and Cyprus is the dispute over the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) the TRNC is not recognized by most countries in the world, while Turkey does not recognize Cyprus nor its EEZ. From the viewpoint of Erdoğan, he tried to the best of his ability to promote the plan of UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan to establish peace and mutual recognition between Cyprus and Turkish Northern Cyprus, while the Greek Cypriots decided against the move in a 2004 plebiscite (65% of the Turkish Cypriots voted for while 76% of Greek Cypriots voted against). From Turkey's point of view, the worst of all was the acceptance of Cyprus to the EU, while Turkey was forced to hold long and exhausting negotiations, which finally reached an impasse after a few years. Therefore, the emergence of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine was preceded by Turkish frustration in the Mediterranean Basin against the background of relations with Europe that were unconnected to the Turkish expansionist policy.

Added to these ambitions to achieve justice in the distribution of resources in the international domain are Turkey's expansionist aspirations, which have become increasingly aggressive. The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine is one more link in the chain of attempts by the Erdoğan regime over the years to position Turkey as the hegemon in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean and in the Persian Gulf. Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership is anxiously waiting for two approaching events: the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Republic in 2023 and the "Day After Erdoğan", given the advanced age and poor health of Turkey's politically strongest leader since the death of the father of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Therefore, Erdoğan, who views himself in an Epic-historical prism, feels the need for a foreign policy achievement that will glorify his heritage.

During the period 2016–19, the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine began to gain popularity in the upper echelons of the Turkish regime. This change was due to a number of factors: from an external perspective, the Erdoğan regime felt that the foreign policy it had adopted in the past, namely of regional cooperation and "zero problems with the neighbors" had not borne fruit. This was particularly the case following the removal of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, who represented the Moslem Brotherhood movement, which is closely connected to the vision of religion-state relations adopted by the Erdoğan government. As a result, the Erdoğan regime has gradually shifted to a more aggressive foreign policy that is based on self-reliance and rules out cooperation with "immoral" countries, a category that includes Egypt under el Sisi, Syria under Assad, Greece, and Israel. Domestically, Erdoğan is finding it difficult to drum up broad public support. Therefore the protection of what is perceived to be Turkey's national interests in a confrontation with the Western nations may lead to a "circling of the wagons" and increase his popularity. Also, the inclusion of the MHP, Admiral Gürdeniz's party, in Erdoğan's internal coalition, has affected the adoption of the doctrine. In August 2019, President Erdoğan made a speech to graduates of the Naval Academy. Behind him was a map showing the borders of the 'Blue Homeland,' a clear message that indicated the adoption of the doctrine by his government.



Figure 1: A map of the Blue Homeland behind President Erdoğan<sup>1</sup>

1 Ekathimerini, (2 September 2019) Erdogan takes photograph in front of 'Blue Homeland' map. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/244125/article/ekathimerini/news/erdogan-takes-photograph-in-front-of-blue-homeland-map>

At first, the attempts by Turkey under Erdoğan to become a regional hegemon were only reflected in the presumption of playing the role of an honest broker in regional conflicts, such as in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in late 2008 and the attempts to persuade Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to use Turkey as a mediator in negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel's Operation 'Cast Lead' in the Gaza Strip in 2008 led to a blunt reaction by Erdoğan and in 2010 to an international maritime confrontation between activists from the İHH organization, a Turkish semi-governmental body, and the Israeli navy. Already then it was claimed that Israel's natural gas exploration and its agreements with Cyprus regarding their EEZs were an important factor in a policy that led to Turkey's confrontation with Israel regarding the Gaza Strip. The policy of "zero problems with the neighbors", which was introduced by Erdoğan's National Security Advisor, and later the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister - Ahmet Davutoğlu, temporarily created a diplomatic halo around Turkey, although it was already encountering problems.

The Arab Spring in 2011 led to even greater presumptuousness on the part of Turkey. Erdoğan viewed his role as one of moral leadership in the Middle East, in the hope of serving as a role model for democratization and religion-state relations in the Arab countries. The victory of Mohamed Morsi in the 2012 Egyptian elections represented significant progress for Erdoğan, whose global prestige skyrocketed when he was chosen by 'Time' magazine as the man of the year in 2011. However, these hopes were dashed when Morsi was deposed in the summer of 2013 by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who has since then served as Egyptian President. At the same time, the riots that broke out in 'Taksim Gezi Park' led the Erdoğan regime to concentrate on political problems at home. Erdoğan's government dealt with the protests firmly openly expressing a sense of persecution on the international level. This turning point significantly reduced support for Erdoğan, both in the international community and in the Middle East specifically. The fainthearted coup against Erdoğan in 2016, the increasing confrontations with the Kurdish separatist factions in the eastern part of the country, and Turkey's severe economic crisis further complicated matters and increased Erdoğan's need to show external achievements (and enemies).

The main strategic and diplomatic layers of the tension caused by the "Blue Homeland" doctrine have deep historical roots in the history of the Republic, and this is hardly the first time in which they caused the emergence of conflict. Current tensions are inseparably connected to the civil war in Libya, which goes far beyond just short-term economic or geopolitical interests. The efforts by Erdoğan to position Turkey as a regional hegemon, in contrast to almost all of his predecessors, constitutes a major component in the revolution he has been promoting for more than two decades

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in Turkey's identity. For example, a conflict arose over the territorial or economic waters between Turkey and Greece in the 1990s concerning delimitation of the maritime territory of the Cyclades, during which there were naval encounters similar to those in 2019. The conflict centered on the country's borders and was in line with the republican ethos of Atatürk, according to which, "*Turkey does not desire one inch of any other country's territory and will not give up one inch of its own.*" The Korean War, during which Turkey joined NATO, and the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, which was also meant to protect national interests, were outlying events in the Republic's history. The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine, therefore, constitutes a milestone in the shift of Turkish policy from to expansionism. However, the gap between Erdoğan's intentions and his political-strategic defense achievements is large. Turkey has not managed to achieve its maximalist aspirations in the Mediterranean, which have been met by opposition by essentially all of the major players in the Mediterranean Basin.

Turkey's attempt under the leadership of Erdoğan to become a dominant power and the aggressive methods used to realize the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine should not cloud our understanding of the legitimate basis for Turkey's demands. Moreover, since Erdoğan's actions are related to Turkey's identity, it is important to understand the role of the doctrine's geostrategic and energy components. The word "Vatan", which means homeland in Turkish, got its interpretation in Turkey simultaneously with the birth of the Republic from within the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic and its first president, created an pro-western, yet neutral ethos, which shunned expansionism and intentionally alienated Turkey from the Arab countries. The secondary and perhaps even negligible interest of the Turkish governments in the Arab countries has often been evident, including at the Madrid Conference in 1991, where Turkey demanded not to be identified as a Middle Eastern country. Turkey's efforts to become a full member of the EU began in 1987 and, until they came to a dead-end toward the end of the 2000s, were part of Turkey's main diplomatic efforts.

The rise of political Islam in Turkey, which was preceded by the rise of the liberal right-wing parties who had a softer approach to Atatürk's heritage, led to growing interest in Turkey's Ottoman past, which was reflected in certain sectors of society, such as the education system and the tourism industry. However, by the last decade, these were beginning to have an influence on Turkey's internal issues of identity. The desire for regional power, which has already been mentioned, and which failed in the attempt to make Turkey into a significant power that also has substantial soft power in the Middle East, has changed in the last decade. This change was reflected

in Turkey's military intervention in the civil wars in Syria and Libya, by means of which Turkey has aligned itself with radical Islamic forces. Turkey has also tightened its relations with Qatar, which has adopted the most subversive diplomatic line against the legitimacy of regimes in the Sunni nations. Turkey's attempt to reposition itself in the region is accomplished by means of consistent support for Hamas in Gaza, Islamic organizations on the Temple Mount, and finally in the adoption of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine as a plan of action for the Erdoğan regime.

Energy also plays a role in the struggle for maritime control of the Mediterranean and it involves interests that are deeply rooted in Turkey's political culture. The loss of the Mosul (currently part of Iraq) district to the British Empire after the World War I and Turkey's War of Independence represent a loss of parts of the homeland in Turkey's collective memory, due to the loss of oil fields and royalties and the loss of control over a Turkmenian and Kurdish population. Another prime example is the oil crisis of 1973–83, which led to a severe economic crisis in Turkey that ended with a military coup and a military government from 1980–83. It is not coincidental that all of Turkey's governments have invested efforts in creating an infrastructure that will transform the country into an energy corridor to Europe and the Port of Ceyhan into a "Rotterdam of the Mediterranean". These efforts were from the beginning of a geopolitical rather than economic nature, due to Turkey's urge to redefine its role in the post-Cold War world.

The combination of the aforementioned processes produced a strategy that includes protectionist-activist principles. On the one hand, Turkey rightly claims that it was not treated fairly in the division of the EEZs in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, it has adopted measures that serve the interests of expansion far beyond its legitimate claims.

Turkey views the current division of EEZs as unfair and discriminatory. It has a much longer coastline than neighboring Greece (in the calculation of the coastline of the mainland without the cumulative coastline of the islands), and its energy needs are also several-fold more extensive (Turkey has a population of 82 million that consumes ten times more natural gas than Greece, which has a population of only 10.7 million, and five times more than Israel which has a population of 9.2 million). Turkey's energy sector is based primarily on natural gas imported from Russia, but it is interested in diversifying its energy sources. From a strategic viewpoint, Turkey is a prime route for conveying natural gas and oil from Caucasus, Russia, and Central Asia to Europe, but for it to exploit this situation for strategic purposes it needs a reliable alternative to Russian natural gas. The production of large amounts of offshore natural gas would be particularly beneficial to Turkey. The fact that the

EU countries have sided with Greece and Cyprus in the conflict strengthens Turkish sense of alienation. Moreover, Turkey claims that in agreements signed by Greece with Italy and Egypt for the delimitation of EEZs, the borders that were arrived at were based on a calculation that was quite similar to the Turkish position.

Even if the early justification given to the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine was energy, the current situation shows that it is actually pure geostrategic interests that are involved. The price of natural gas is at rock bottom due to the Covid-19 crisis, but there are also longer-term factors, such as the growing use of oil shale, which make the development of natural gas projects unworthwhile. The multinationals are abandoning existing exploration projects and are not initiating new ones. Therefore, it does not seem likely that the current tension can be resolved by way of a reallocation of natural gas only. From Turkey's perspective, this conflict is first and foremost about sovereignty. According to public opinion polls, about 58 percent of Turkey's citizens view the EEZs as an issue of importance for national security, as opposed to only 3.8 percent that held this position at the beginning of 2020. The high level of support among the Turkish public on this issue provides the Erdoğan regime with greater room for maneuver, and it may be that an escalation of the conflict will even serve domestic goals of generating support and public legitimacy.

The final removal from consideration of Turkey joining the EU provides it with new room for maneuver in unrecognized Turkish Northern Cyprus since it now feels far less need to commit to the international consensus. The decline in American involvement in the Mediterranean Basin only reinforces this trend. In terms of its maritime activities, Turkey is seeking to build a new maritime base to the east of Northern Cyprus, which will provide it with a more rapid response capability with respect to other forces in the area. However, the most blatant manifestation so far of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine was the signing in November 2019 of a memorandum of understanding between Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya. Libya is currently undergoing a civil war between the GNA, which controls the western part of the country, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which controls the central and eastern parts. Turkey and Qatar, with some backing from the EU, support the GNA, which has Islamist tendencies and is backed by Islamic militias, including members of Jabhat al-Nusra, as opposed to Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, which support the forces of Haftar.

The agreement between Turkey and the GNA defines the delimitation of EEZs between Turkey and Libya, among other things, in a way that significantly enlarges Turkey's EEZ and interrupts the territorial continuity between Cyprus and Crete. Furthermore, the EEZ blocks the planned construction of the gas pipeline from Israel



by way of Cyprus and Greece, which will enable the export of Israeli and Cypriot gas to Europe.

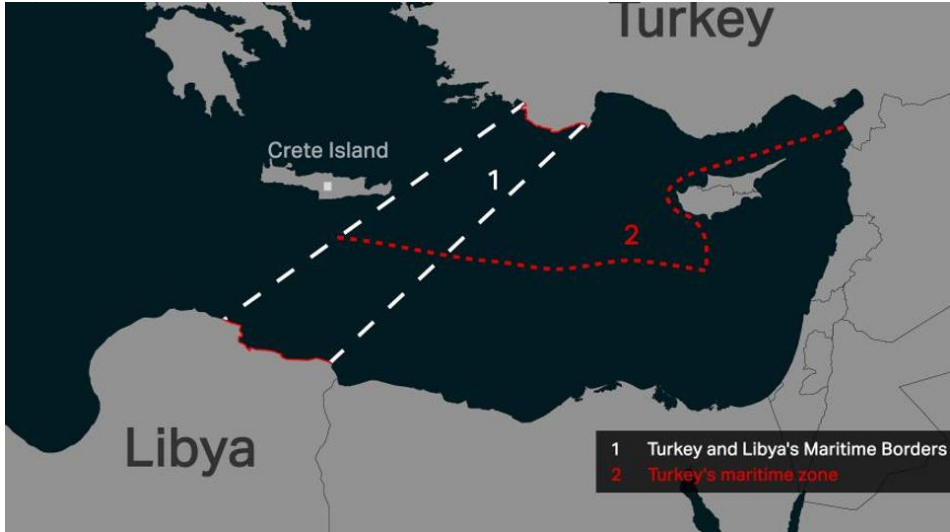


Figure 2: Delimitation of the maritime territories according to the Libyan-Turkish memorandum of understanding of November 2019

In response to the memorandum of understanding, Greece has, since June 2020, maintained contact with the LNA under the leadership of Haftar, with the goal of creating its own delimitation of the EEZ between the two countries. Moreover, there has recently been a tightening of relations between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, which have a shared interest in halting the Turkish expansion in the maritime domain. For Egypt, this interest is accompanied by the need to protect its western boundary against the GNA, which is supported by Turkey and Islamic militias.

It should be emphasized that for the good of the parties involved and in view of Turkey's energy needs, a solution of the dispute over Turkey's EEZ should be reached by negotiations possibly with the mediation of other countries (such as Germany) or additional organizations. Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO, also expressed this idea on his visit to Ankara in October 2020.<sup>2</sup>

2 "...The de-confliction mechanism can help to create the space for diplomatic efforts. It is my firm hope that the underlying disputes can now be addressed purely through negotiations, in the spirit of Allied solidarity and international law." NATO (5 October 2020), "Secretary General in Ankara: Turkey is a valued NATO Ally". [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_178545.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178545.htm)

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Although the Convention for the Law of the Sea determines the areas of the EEZs, it of course, allows for negotiations between the parties, international arbitration, and other mechanisms for conflict resolution. The EEZ around an islands is a common issue in such conflicts, such as the Philippines vs. China; Romania vs. Ukraine; and Bangladesh vs. Myanmar, all of which involve islands and the maritime territories they provide at the expense of the mainland country. Turkey mentions in particular the conflict over EEZs between Nicaragua and Colombia, which has similar characteristics (control over islands that provide a large EEZ at the expense of the mainland country) and which was resolved by a ruling that divided the maritime territory between Nicaragua and Colombia not according to the Convention for the Law of the Sea.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, other countries of the region, as well as global players, are reacting negatively to the Turkish moves. Apart from Greece and Cyprus, whose sovereignty is being threatened by Turkey, Egypt has viewed Turkey as a rival at least since the end of Mohamed Morsi's rule, if not before. EU states, led by France as a Mediterranean nation, are opposed to the Turkish position, as is the US. Nonetheless, so far, the US and the EU have not assertively opposed the Turkish moves or actively supported Greece and Cyprus, and it remains to be seen if they will do so in the future. Without their intervention, the countries of the region will have to rely on themselves and on cooperation between them in order to deal with the threat from Turkey. Furthermore, Erdoğan's lack of success in resolving the current round of confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region reduces the chances that Turkey will adopt a more conciliatory position in the Mediterranean anytime soon.

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3 It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the legal complexity of delimitation of maritime boundaries in international law; however, it can be stated in this context that the precedent of the conflict between Nicaragua and Columbia is not completely analogous to that between Turkey and Greece, since in the former case there were previous agreements on the matter between the countries.