



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Discoveries of Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean and Their Implications for Maritime Boundary Delineation (2010-2024)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Sep 19, 2024 Accepted: Nov 12, 2024	<p>The Eastern Mediterranean Region is considered one of the most geostrategic regions in the world due to its enormous, recently discovered economic potential represented by huge natural gas fields. The aim of this research is to know the impact and repercussions of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean region on the demarcation of maritime borders between the countries of the region (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, Libya, Egypt, Palestine). The research showed that gas discoveries deepened the conflicts between the countries overlooking the eastern Mediterranean region, and contributed to the emergence of tensions between the countries of the region and the increasing intensity of disputes among them, which was reflected in Demarcating the maritime borders between these countries. The researcher concluded that there are three scenarios for the future of these relations or for solving the problems of demarcating the maritime borders between the countries of the region. The first is resorting to international justice, the second is cooperation and overcoming differences, and the third is military confrontation.</p>
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### INTRODUCTION

In March 2010, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) announced that the Eastern Mediterranean Basin contains a massive stockpile of extractable hydrocarbon energy resources, including oil and gas. This announcement was accompanied by the discovery of significant gas fields with large reserves located in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) off the coasts of most Eastern Mediterranean countries.

The Eastern Mediterranean region has gained substantial importance in the global economic system due to its natural resources, primarily gas. The competition over the gas wealth discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean since the beginning of the 21st century has sparked disputes and conflicts among international and regional powers. With the increase in gas discoveries, regional conflicts and competition over these resources have intensified, turning them into a potential threat to stability rather than a stabilizing factor in the Mediterranean.

These discoveries have introduced a new source of conflict and sparked extensive debate among the countries in the region over their rights to exploit these resources for their benefit. This has driven these countries to delineate their maritime boundaries according to the 1958 Convention on the Law

of the Sea and to enter into bilateral demarcation agreements. Examples include the maritime boundary agreement between Cyprus and Egypt in 2003 and the maritime boundary agreement between Israel and Cyprus in 2004. However, these agreements have not prevented disputes from arising over the exploration and exploitation of gas fields located in the Mediterranean region.

### **Research Problem and Questions:**

The exploitation of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean faces multiple challenges, including legal issues related to the delimitation of maritime boundaries between Eastern Mediterranean countries, as well as economic and technical issues associated with laying gas pipelines necessary for export and converting natural gas into liquefied natural gas (LNG) for distant markets. In addition to legal and technical challenges, these discoveries also add a new factor fueling the environment of conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean and between major powers. On the other hand, they present opportunities for cooperation among the basin countries.

Based on this, the research problem can be defined as follows: the demarcation of maritime boundaries between Eastern Mediterranean countries is closely related to the outcomes of gas discoveries in this vital region, which could potentially settle existing conflicts and achieve a balance that serves the interests of these countries. The main research question is:

### **Have energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean affected the maritime boundary delineation among Eastern Mediterranean countries?**

The primary question is further divided into the following sub-questions:

- What are the most significant gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin?
- What is the importance of these discoveries and their impact on achieving energy security for the countries in the region?
- What are the challenges associated with exploiting the discovered gas and generating financial returns from it?
- What are the main maritime boundary agreements in the Eastern Mediterranean?
- How have energy discoveries influenced the maritime boundary delineation between Eastern Mediterranean countries?

### **Research Importance:**

The importance of this research centers on the significant economic implications of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. The objectives of the conflicting parties in the Eastern Mediterranean are complex, and the region's importance is further emphasized by the substantial natural gas reserves, as estimated by US geological surveys. This study highlights the impact of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean on the delineation of maritime boundaries between Eastern Mediterranean countries from 2010 to 2024.

### **Study Objectives:**

- Highlight the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean region and its wealth of resources.
- Analyze the competition over gas in the Eastern Mediterranean and its effect on the maritime boundary delineation among Eastern Mediterranean countries between 2010 and 2024, contributing to previous studies examining the reasons behind regional conflicts and transformations.

- Identify the influence of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean on the delineation of maritime boundaries between regional countries during the 2010-2024 period.
- Present the major maritime boundary delineation projects among Eastern Mediterranean countries following gas discoveries.

### **Research Timeframe:**

The research begins in 2010, the year when it was announced that the Eastern Mediterranean Basin contains a substantial stockpile of extractable energy resources in the form of oil and gas, and concludes in the current year, 2024.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This study will rely on theoretical perspectives from the realist approach:

The realist analysis centers around the concept of national interest, emphasizing national and regional security as a priority for the state. This has characterized the relationships between states as being marked by competition and conflict. States are concerned with increasing their military arsenal and, consequently, their material power to dominate over other states, adhering to a competitive logic for power accumulation. Even the notion of measuring state power relatively supports the logic of an arms race and the pursuit of greater power, reinforcing the idea that competition is inherent in inter-state relations, while cooperation is unlikely, if not impossible, as a mode of interaction.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study will employ the systems analysis approach in international relations, which aligns with the nature of international relations within the global system. This approach divides the world into an international system and regional or sub-systems (major units, minor units, and intermediate units), which interact with each other through a complex web of influence and response relationships. These interactions create patterns of behavior within the international system or sub-systems. The researcher will use this approach to analyze the study's variables, including two main variables: the independent variable, which is the gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the dependent variable, which is the maritime boundary disputes in the region.

The descriptive-analytical method will also be used, as it is indispensable in humanities research due to the difficulty of experimental application as in natural sciences. This study will utilize descriptive analysis to understand gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean and their implications on maritime boundary delineation in the region since 2010.

### **Section One: Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean and Their Geopolitical Significance**

More than half a century has passed since the discovery of the first gas field, Abu Madi, in Egypt's Delta region in **1967**, followed by the Abu Qir gas field off the Mediterranean coast in **1969**. Gas exploration continued in the Eastern Mediterranean region <sup>i</sup>, but before **2009**, the area had not received much attention for offshore natural gas discoveries. However, in January **2009**, the Tamar gas field was discovered within Israel's maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean, and subsequent gas discoveries followed in the Eastern Mediterranean <sup>ii</sup>.

Since the **1990s**, the significance of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has grown significantly. Successive discoveries have indicated that this region may become one of the world's most critical sources of natural gas over the next half-century. A frequently cited report by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimates that the region holds at least **122 trillion** standard cubic

feet of natural gas, which could provide energy not only for local populations but potentially also for Europe and other regions <sup>iii</sup>.

During this period, natural gas began to be viewed as the fuel of the future, with global consumption tripling between **1980** and **2010**, and demand is expected to increase by **50%** by **2030** <sup>iv</sup>.

Some of the notable discoveries, in chronological order, include:

- **Gaza Marine Field:** Discovered in **2000** by British Gas (a subsidiary of BP) at a distance of **36 km** off the coast of Gaza, with an estimated reserve of approximately **1 trillion** cubic feet of gas <sup>v</sup>.
- In December **2009**, the Aphrodite field was discovered **180 km** off Cyprus's southwestern coast, with estimated reserves of approximately **9 trillion** cubic feet of natural gas <sup>vi</sup>.
- **Levant Basin:** According to a report by the US Geological Survey published in early April **2010**, the Levant Basin, covering **83,000 km<sup>2</sup>** and encompassing the land and offshore areas of Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, as well as Cyprus's maritime areas, contains around **122 trillion** cubic feet of natural gas and about **1.7 billion** barrels of crude oil <sup>vii</sup>.
- **Leviathan Field:** A massive offshore natural gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean off the coasts of Palestine and Lebanon, with reserves estimated at **540 billion** cubic meters. It is located **150 km** north of Damietta Province on the southern slope of the Eratosthenes Seamount and was discovered by Israel in **2010**.
- **Tamar Field:** The second largest natural gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean, supplying around **60%** of Israel's electricity needs by **2016**, with an estimated reserve of about **7.9 trillion** cubic feet. The field is located **90 km** off Israel's northern coast and lies **1,650 meters** below the sea surface <sup>viii</sup>.

The Eastern Mediterranean holds vast natural gas reserves. As of December **2018**, the region's discovered natural gas needs amounted to **4,880 billion** cubic meters. Estimates indicate that Cyprus's Aphrodite, Calypso, and Glaucus fields contain over **400 billion** cubic meters, compared to the discovery of **850 billion** cubic meters in Egypt's offshore area in **2019** <sup>ix</sup>.

The researcher believes that the substantial natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have political, economic, and security implications, profoundly affecting the region's status quo. Despite the economic opportunities offered by these resources, various maritime boundary disputes complicate resource exploration and development, as will be discussed later.

The Eastern Mediterranean region holds significant strategic importance as a connecting hub and intersection point for East-West maritime transport routes. However, this area has experienced international competition and conflict for decades, represented by the Turkish-Greek dispute over maritime boundary delimitation. The importance of the Eastern Mediterranean has increased over the past decade due to the discovery of natural gas reserves in its waters <sup>x</sup>.

The discovery of large natural gas and oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin over the past ten years has created substantial short- and medium-term strategic importance. This makes Eastern Mediterranean countries vital for exporting natural gas to meet growing demand in the region, with potential exports of surplus gas to European and Asian markets due to the region's strategic location <sup>xi</sup>. Thus, the geopolitical significance of Eastern Mediterranean gas is highlighted by the following projections:

1. The Eastern Mediterranean is expected to become the "fourth energy corridor to Europe" by **2030**, containing some of the largest natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean and globally <sup>xii</sup>.

2. Interest in seabed exploration for petroleum resources has spread to other areas of the region, with international oil companies seeking multiple exploration rights <sup>xiii</sup>.

Certainly, the Eastern Mediterranean faces substantial challenges and risks of a geopolitical, security, boundary, technical, market, financial, and regulatory nature, among others. The region is subject to interactions among various international and regional powers, each aiming to safeguard its interests in the area in line with its geopolitical plans <sup>xiv</sup>.

There are concerns over foreign intervention in the region following gas discoveries. The development of oil reserves in Middle Eastern countries—home to the world's finest oil—led industrial countries to rely on this oil, fostering competition among major powers and Western interference in Middle Eastern affairs <sup>xv</sup>.

The researcher believes that gas discoveries in the region could contribute, to some extent, to peaceful cooperation among Eastern Mediterranean countries if properly managed. This could be achieved through beneficial geo-economic comparisons, revealing potential economic activities in cooperative natural gas ventures and overcoming sovereignty-related disputes.

The Eastern Mediterranean has historically witnessed regional conflicts, and gas discoveries have reignited these, resulting in new balance equations at regional and strategic levels <sup>xvi</sup>. These discoveries have significantly escalated tensions between the countries in this region. Existing disputes, including the Turkish-Cypriot and Arab-Israeli conflicts, have become more strained in recent years, with relationships among the region's countries becoming increasingly complex, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring that has swept through the Arab world since early **2011**, toppling several governments <sup>xvii</sup>.

The importance of these offshore discoveries lies in the fact that they occurred in Eastern Mediterranean countries that had not seen significant hydrocarbon discoveries during the 20th century. However, the existence of these fields in contiguous and interlinked Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and the discoveries occurring before the finalization of boundary agreements, only adds to the complexity of the numerous political disputes among the concerned countries, potentially opening new fronts of confrontation <sup>xviii</sup>.

The researcher views the Eastern Mediterranean as one of the most geostrategically critical areas, posing a threat to the future of international security and peace. The region's significant geopolitical importance lies in its economic potential, which could intensify regional and international conflicts over recent gas discoveries. These discoveries have increased levels of disputes among the countries in this area, prompting many to formalize their maritime boundaries legally, escalating political, economic, and military tensions within the region.

## **Section Two: Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean under International Law**

The delimitation of boundaries is a technical process that follows the initial boundary determination, during which a boundary line is physically marked on the ground through legal instruments, using physical markers or other indicators. The delimitation process is a technical procedure to implement the initial boundary determination and serves as a practical application of the descriptive process.

Maritime boundary issues between coastal states are governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) <sup>xix</sup>, adopted in **1982** and entering into force on **16 November 1994** after ratification by **62** countries. The Convention divides seas into four main zones: the territorial sea, extending up to a maximum of **12 nautical miles** from the baseline with full sovereignty of the state; the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), set at **200 nautical miles** from the baseline; the continental shelf; and the high seas.

The Convention explicitly states general principles for the exploitation of natural resources, both living and non-living, in the waters or seabed, including hydrocarbon and petroleum resources. However, UNCLOS remains a general framework that obligates countries only to agree on adherence to it <sup>xx</sup>.

Turkey, Syria, Israel, and the United States have not joined the Convention. Most legal experts consider the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, particularly the rules on maritime boundary delimitation, binding on all states, including those that have not joined, as the Convention has become part of international law <sup>xxi</sup>.

UNCLOS provides rules for the delimitation of maritime boundaries between states and for the exploitation, management, and exploration of living resources and natural resources on the seabed. It also includes important provisions on establishing navigation rights and the usage of oceans, defines the extent of states' sovereignty over their maritime zones, and establishes the International Seabed Authority along with mechanisms for dispute resolution. The Convention identifies four maritime zones for coastal states and specifies the sovereignty boundaries of each, as illustrated below: the territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf <sup>xxii</sup>.

### 1. Territorial Water-TS

The territorial sea is the area where the sovereignty of each coastal state extends beyond its land territory and internal waters to an adjacent maritime belt, with a width that does not exceed **12 nautical miles**. This sovereignty also extends to the airspace above the territorial sea as well as its seabed and subsoil.

- **Contiguous Zone (CZ):**

The contiguous zone is an area adjacent to the territorial sea where the coastal state can exercise control necessary to prevent infringement of its laws, including taxation, customs, immigration, and health regulations within its territory or territorial sea, and has the right to punish any violation of these laws and regulations. The contiguous zone must not extend more than **12 nautical miles** from the end of the state's territorial sea boundary <sup>xxiii</sup>.

- **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ):**

The EEZ is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, governed by the legal framework established by the Convention. The coastal state's rights, jurisdiction, and the rights and freedoms of other states within the EEZ are subject to the provisions of the Convention. Article 57 of UNCLOS specifies that the EEZ may extend up to **200 nautical miles** from the baseline from which the territorial sea is measured.

- **Continental Shelf (CS):**

According to Article 78, the continental shelf of a coastal state includes the seabed and subsoil of the submerged areas that extend beyond its territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin, or **200 nautical miles** from the baseline if the continental margin does not extend that far. In all cases, the continental shelf cannot exceed **350 nautical miles**. The coastal state exercises sovereign rights to explore and exploit the natural resources within its continental shelf. If the continental shelf extends beyond the EEZ, no other state may explore or exploit its resources without the consent of the coastal state <sup>xxiv</sup>.

The **1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea** addressed several key issues concerning ocean usage and sovereignty:

- A. Territorial sea boundaries were set at **12 nautical miles** from the shore.

- B. EEZs were established up to **200 nautical miles** from the shore, with rules for extending continental shelf rights up to **350 nautical miles**.
- C. Navigation rights were affirmed, and other mechanisms for dispute resolution, like the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, were established <sup>xxv</sup>.

Part XV of the **1982 UNCLOS** is dedicated to resolving international disputes by peaceful means, including provisions and procedures leading to binding decisions by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, applicable only to states party to the Convention. In other words, its jurisdiction is limited to its signatories <sup>xxvi</sup>.

The researcher believes that despite the comprehensive and idealistic nature of the **1982 UNCLOS**, the dominance of states' geostrategic interests, alongside legal and political considerations, has led to bilateral disputes between geographically adjacent states, complicating the delimitation of their maritime boundaries as required by international maritime law.

The Convention was adopted in **1982** and entered into effect in **1994**. By **10 January 2014**, **166 countries** had ratified or acceded to the treaty, including Greece, Lebanon, Egypt, and Cyprus. Some countries have signed but not yet ratified it, such as Afghanistan and Greece, along with the United States. Some countries, such as Israel and Turkey, have not signed it at all. Turkey refuses to recognize it due to Greece's claim over the Aegean Sea, which separates Turkey from Greece. Nonetheless, most legal experts assert that UNCLOS is binding on all states, including those that have not joined, as it has become an integral part of international law <sup>xxvii</sup>.

### **Section Three: Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreements and Exclusive Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Recently, the Eastern Mediterranean region has seen numerous issues raised concerning the delineation of maritime boundaries among the countries in this area, particularly following the discovery of massive oil and natural gas fields beneath the Mediterranean waters. Accurate boundary delineation between these coastal states, whether opposite or adjacent, has become a crucial requirement. Without precise boundary agreements, multiple conflicts and disputes could arise, potentially escalating into armed conflicts if agreements are not reached <sup>xxviii</sup>.

Countries rich in natural resources generally prefer to avoid friction with neighboring states and strive for security and peaceful coexistence. Conversely, densely populated and resource-poor nations tend to resort to conflicts and disputes with neighbors, leading to relationships marked by mistrust and ambitions to claim natural resources if there is justification, aiming to extend influence over adjacent border areas <sup>xxix</sup>.

The researcher believes that the issue of maritime boundary delineation in the Eastern Mediterranean is a significant factor in regional disputes, particularly due to the discovery of large oil and gas fields, some of which are located in contested areas between Cyprus and Israel, Cyprus and Egypt, and Israel and Lebanon.

The wave of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin has brought the issue of maritime boundary delineation back into focus, presenting it as one of the challenges to exploiting the newly discovered gas resources and, consequently, as a factor exacerbating conflicts in the region. Most Eastern Mediterranean countries have not delineated their maritime boundaries due to the existing conflicts and disputes within the region <sup>xxx</sup>.

#### **Lebanese-Cypriot Maritime Boundary Delimitation:**

Lebanon delineated its maritime boundaries under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) by issuing Law No. 163 "Defining and Declaring the Maritime Zones of the Lebanese Republic" on August 18, 2011. On January 17, 2007, the Lebanese and Cypriot governments signed an agreement to delineate the maritime boundary between the two countries, specifically for determining the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with the aim of fostering good neighborly relations and cooperation for the exploitation of oil resources. According to the Lebanese Army, this agreement was based on the laws stipulated in UNCLOS <sup>xxxix</sup>.

The EEZ boundary between Lebanon and Cyprus was defined along the median line, in accordance with Article 74 of UNCLOS, given that Cyprus and Lebanon are opposite states. The boundary was delineated according to two provisional points: Point 1 to the south and Point 6 to the north. The third article of the agreement required any party negotiating maritime boundary delineation with another state to consult the other party if making adjustments to any point from 1 or 6. However, Lebanon did not ratify this agreement, and it was not enforced due to the Lebanese Parliament's non-ratification as required by general international law.

In 2011, Israel signed a separate agreement with Cyprus to delineate the EEZ between them, disregarding the previous agreement with Lebanon, resulting in Lebanon losing an area exceeding 860 km<sup>2</sup>, which contains substantial oil and gas reserves <sup>xxxix</sup>.

### **Lebanese-Israeli Maritime Boundary Delimitation:**

There has been a dispute between Lebanon and Israel over the delineation of their maritime boundary, involving a triangular contested area that each country considers part of its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The apex of this triangle is a 22-meter strip along the eastern coast of the basin, with a 17-kilometer base extending westward along the outer edge of both states' EEZs. The total area of the disputed region is approximately 850 km<sup>2</sup> <sup>xxxix</sup>. Although this area is relatively small, seismic survey data suggest it may contain more substantial oil reserves than those in the Israeli and Cypriot areas, which have comparatively limited oil reserves <sup>xxxix</sup>.

In 2007, Lebanon signed an agreement to delineate its maritime boundary with Cyprus; however, the Lebanese Parliament did not ratify it due to Turkey's objection, similar to its previous objections to Cyprus's agreements with Egypt and Israel <sup>xxxix</sup>.

After Israel and Cyprus signed a maritime boundary agreement in 2010, which included the disputed area with Lebanon, Lebanon informed the United Nations in June 2011 of its opposition to the agreement, claiming it violated Lebanon's sovereign and economic rights in the contested area <sup>xxxix</sup>.

In 2013, Lebanon, aiming to explore energy resources in its EEZ, proposed five blocks for exploration, although the process was only completed in 2017. Parts of three of these blocks fall within the disputed area, provoking objections from Israel. In response, Israel proposed a bill in the Knesset to unilaterally annex the disputed area to Israel <sup>xxxix</sup>.

Since 2012, the United States has mediated to resolve the Lebanese-Israeli dispute over the 330-square-mile triangle in the Eastern Mediterranean. The area gained strategic importance after the discovery of natural gas off the coasts of Israel and Cyprus in 2009. Lebanon ultimately agreed to US mediation despite objections from Hezbollah, while Israel accepted several conditions set by the Lebanese government <sup>xxxix</sup>.

These developments escalated tensions between the two countries, with Israeli officials making severe statements about a "potential catastrophic war." In response, the United States reaffirmed its support and military assistance for the Lebanese Army. In an official statement, the US embassy in Lebanon reiterated America's commitment to a secure and stable Lebanon. The United States had proposed various solutions to the crisis, including a 2013 proposal for a "maritime blue line," under



which the area within the line would remain undeveloped until a full resolution could be reached. However, Israel rejected this proposal <sup>xxxix</sup>.

On October 27, 2022, Lebanon and Israel reached a historic agreement to delineate their maritime boundaries after years of intensive US-mediated negotiations. President Biden welcomed the agreement between Lebanon and Israel, praising the official signing of their long-term maritime boundary resolution. He noted that negotiations under US auspices began in 2011 and resumed officially in October 2020 in light of the Eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries. The agreement aims to reinforce the relative calm since 2006, despite ongoing hostilities and regular tensions between Hezbollah and the Israeli army in Syria and southern Lebanon. This boundary delineation implies indirect cooperation between Lebanon and Israel <sup>xl</sup>.

Reaching this agreement marks a significant diplomatic achievement for the United States and President Joe Biden's administration, which was keen to secure it as an important foreign policy success before the midterm congressional elections. The agreement presents the Democratic administration as capable of forging major diplomatic agreements that serve Israeli interests while promoting regional stability in the Middle East, potentially garnering support for the Democratic Party in the upcoming legislative elections <sup>xli</sup>.

### **The 2020 Egypt-Greece Maritime Boundary Agreement:**

On August 6, 2020, Egypt and Greece signed a maritime boundary agreement during Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias's visit to Cairo. This agreement is expected to have significant impacts at the national, regional, and international levels, particularly concerning Turkey, which seeks to assert control over the Eastern Mediterranean's gas and other discovered resources <sup>xlii</sup>.

The agreement delineated the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) between the two countries, allowing both parties to proceed with resource exploitation and exploration activities. Egypt has repeatedly emphasized the need to take measures to protect its interests and resources in the Mediterranean <sup>xliii</sup>.

Article 2 obliges both parties to cooperate in reaching an agreement on the exploitation of natural resources, including hydrocarbons, that may extend from one party's EEZ into the other's <sup>xliv</sup>.

### **The Egypt-Cyprus Maritime Boundary Agreement:**

Egypt and Cyprus successfully signed an agreement on February 17, 2003, to delineate their EEZs, which was registered with the United Nations on January 14, 2008. The Egypt-Cyprus agreement was based entirely on the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which both countries signed and ratified, making it their technical and legal reference for their joint agreement. Each country identified its baseline points in alignment with the convention's provisions <sup>xlv</sup>.

After June 30, 2013, negotiations on natural gas cooperation, especially with Cyprus and Greece, were reopened. On December 12, 2013, during the interim presidency of Adly Mansour, Egypt and Cyprus signed a maritime boundary agreement, which enabled Egypt to search for gas resources in the Mediterranean. This led to the discovery of the Zohr field, with a production capacity of approximately 3 billion cubic meters per day <sup>xlvi</sup>.

### **Dispute Over Maritime Boundary Delimitation Between Turkey and Greece (Cyprus):**

The regional conflict between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus and the Aegean Islands dates back to the 1960s. Disputes over Cyprus and the Aegean Sea have been major contributors to the recent tensions between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean, where newly discovered gas

reserves have accelerated exploration efforts, heightening conflicts and frictions between the two countries <sup>xlvii</sup>.

The Greek-Turkish disputes center on the division of the continental shelf between the two nations. Turkey argues that the application of international treaties related to delineating the continental shelf is impossible and has not become a signatory to these treaties, demanding a negotiated division of the Aegean shelf that would grant it a larger portion. Greece, on the other hand, favors a resolution issued by the International Court of Justice <sup>xlviii</sup>.

Greece has asserted its right to expand its territorial waters to 12 nautical miles under Article 3 of the Law of the Sea, but Turkey opposes this claim, viewing it as a misuse of acquired rights that could harm other states' interests. Ankara fears that Greece's claim could have negative repercussions, as it would transfer 53.71% of the Aegean Sea to Greek waters compared to 76.8% of Turkish waters, forcing Turkey to depend on Greek decisions for access to the Mediterranean or conducting naval maneuvers <sup>xlix</sup>.

The initial conflict between the Republic of Cyprus (Greek Cyprus) and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus arose when the latter objected to Cyprus's exploration activities in the island's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), claiming there was no single legitimate government representing the entire island <sup>l</sup>.

Cyprus maintains that all its actions comply with international law, as it is recognized internationally and holds sovereignty over the waters surrounding Cyprus. Thus, Cyprus asserts its right to enter into boundary delimitation agreements with other countries and claims exclusive ownership of exploration and exploitation rights for natural resources in its EEZ <sup>li</sup>.

Turkey argues that the resources of the island of Cyprus belong to the entire island, regardless of their location, and has called on Cyprus to halt exploration activities and form a joint committee, with UN involvement, to decide on licenses and revenue sharing. Cyprus, however, considers Turkey's legal arguments unacceptable under international law, asserting that Turkish Cypriots can benefit from these discoveries only within a unified Cyprus, and that resource exploration activities are non-negotiable and not contingent on resolving the Cyprus issue <sup>lii</sup>.

The second dispute between Turkey and Cyprus arises from their differing bases for maritime boundary determination. Turkey, which has not joined UNCLOS, bases its maritime boundaries on the concept of the continental shelf, whereas Cyprus uses the concept of the EEZ <sup>liii</sup>.

Turkey argues that since Cyprus is an island, its continental shelf should be smaller than Turkey's. Cyprus has objected to Turkey's stance, considering it unlawful <sup>liv</sup>. Based on its continental shelf concept, Turkey also opposes the agreement Cyprus signed with Egypt for delineating their maritime boundaries, which defines each country's EEZ, enabling them to exploit resources. Turkey's objection is based on the claim that the agreement disregards Turkey's continental shelf rights in the area west of the referenced meridian. Turkey argues that its shelf extends to cover almost the Cypriot EEZ to the west, making Turkey and Egypt opposite states with a shared maritime boundary <sup>lv</sup>.

In a statement issued on February 11, 2018, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated that the Turkish government would take necessary measures to protect its rights and interests in the continental shelf and those of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It held Cyprus solely responsible for irresponsibly endangering the security and stability of the Eastern Mediterranean by continuing hydrocarbon exploration activities and called on companies operating in the field to refrain from cooperating with the Greek Cypriot administration in hydrocarbon exploration <sup>lvi</sup>.

The researcher believes that the conflict between Greece and Turkey is part of a long-standing political and diplomatic struggle, whose roots go back many years, with recent gas discoveries only deepening these disputes.

### **Maritime Dispute Between Israel and Palestine:**

The 1994 Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority concerning Gaza and Jericho established the legal foundation for dividing the maritime areas off the Gaza coast, allowing the Palestinian Authority to exercise its sovereign and exploratory rights. The agreement defined these rights within 20 nautical miles measured from the baseline. The issue of maritime boundary delimitation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (Gaza) remains a point of contention. Israel's position is to deny the Palestinian Authority's right to benefit from UNCLOS, arguing that Palestine is not a sovereign state and thus lacks rights to explore or exploit discovered resources. Conversely, the Palestinian Authority retains jurisdiction within 20 nautical miles from the coast under the Oslo Accords, which includes exploratory rights over resources <sup>lvii</sup>.

### **Turkey-Libyan Government of National Accord Agreement:**

Turkey aims to establish itself as a regional power with significant influence, particularly concerning Mediterranean gas and northern Syria. Turkey is aware of its strategic geopolitical position as a bridge between three continents and of the geo-economic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean regarding maritime navigation, energy reserves, and gas pipelines. This ambition aligns with its goal of becoming an energy-exporting hub, leading to direct diplomatic and military confrontations <sup>lviii</sup>.

On **November 27, 2019**, Turkish President Erdoğan signed two memoranda of understanding with Fayeze al-Sarraj, head of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya. These memoranda covered security and military cooperation and delineated maritime zones of influence between the two countries <sup>lix</sup>.

The maritime memorandum grants Turkey control over a significant strip of Mediterranean waters, allowing it to claim sovereignty over this area, with movement restricted without Turkey's consent. The second memorandum pertains to Turkey's potential military intervention within Libyan territory, should the Libyan government request such assistance from Ankara <sup>lx</sup>.

Through this memorandum and military-security cooperation, Turkey seeks to establish an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) stretching from its southern Mediterranean coast to Libya's northeastern coast. This threatens the interests of Eastern Mediterranean countries, particularly Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, and infringes on their legal rights over discovered and potential energy resources within their EEZs <sup>lxi</sup>.

The researcher believes that Libya's geography has positioned it as a key player in the Eastern Mediterranean. The competition over oil wealth has intensified, as seen in Turkey's eagerness to sign the memorandum of understanding and cooperate with Libya.

Following the announcement of the Turkey-Libyan GNA agreement in Tripoli, opposing reactions emerged. Egypt, in a statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, condemned the Turkish agreement with the Libyan government led by Fayeze al-Sarraj. Egypt highlighted Turkey's multifaceted involvement in Libya, including its alignment with the GNA, support for affiliated armed groups, and collaboration with leaders willing to cooperate with Ankara <sup>lxii</sup>.

## **Section Four: The Future of Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean Amid Gas Discoveries**

### **Establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum:**

Turkey has sought to strengthen its relations with the Libyan government to legitimize its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean through a maritime boundary agreement. In response, Egypt has led efforts to establish the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) as a coordination mechanism for

regional countries. The heightened tensions in the region can largely be attributed to Turkey's direct interventions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which have bolstered regional countries' collaborative strategies. Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus conducted a joint military exercise to reinforce their defense mechanisms for common objectives and explore potential scenarios, including alignment, escalation, and military confrontation <sup>lxiii</sup>.

In **January 2019**, Eastern Mediterranean countries (Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Italy, Cyprus, and Greece) convened and announced the establishment of the EMGF in Cairo. The forum's purpose is to coordinate policies for the sustainable exploitation of natural gas in ways that serve the common interests of the member states, expedite the utilization of current and future gas reserves, establish a regional framework that respects each member's rights to its natural resources under international law, and support member states in leveraging their gas reserves, infrastructure, and new infrastructure for energy security and the welfare of their populations <sup>lxiv</sup>.

The forum includes Egypt, Greek Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and Italy, with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority invited as observers. On **September 22, 2020**, in Cairo, the founding countries of the EMGF signed the forum's charter, officially establishing it as a regional organization headquartered in Cairo <sup>lxv</sup>. Transforming the EMGF into a regional organization, with founding members Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Jordan, represents a historic step toward collaboration in the Eastern Mediterranean. This nascent organization could be the starting point for broader cooperation across the Mediterranean, with the founding charter allowing other nations to join if they adopt the forum's values and objectives <sup>lxvi</sup>.

The researcher believes that this forum marks a significant phase in the competition among neighboring countries over the world's largest natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. The forum also serves as a strategic move to counter Turkey's ambitions to become a regional natural gas trade hub, given its strategic location at the crossroads between Russia, the gas- and oil-rich Mediterranean states, and Europe, which has substantial energy needs.

### **Future Scenarios:**

The security situation in the Eastern Mediterranean remains unstable. There are uncertainties about whether tensions will persist, whether oil-related crises will escalate in the future, leading to military conflicts in maritime areas, and the impact such escalation might have on the execution and costs of projects, particularly regarding insurance costs and consumer confidence in reliable supply without interruptions <sup>lxvii</sup>.

Given the intentions of Eastern Mediterranean countries and those with vested security interests in the region, several possible scenarios could unfold against the backdrop of Turkey's unauthorized gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. These scenarios include political, economic, and military ramifications, outlined below:

#### **1. Peaceful Resolution of Natural Gas Disputes through International Courts:**

The primary challenge concerning Mediterranean gas lies in the distribution of potential gas reserves, which inevitably involves maritime boundary delimitation a significant issue due to the proximity of Greek islands to mainland Turkey and the unresolved Cyprus dispute <sup>lxviii</sup>. Part XV of the **1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea** is dedicated to resolving international disputes through peaceful means, with bodies such as the International Court of Justice, international arbitration, and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea playing essential roles in resolving maritime boundary disputes by establishing widely recognized legal principles <sup>lxix</sup>.

The researcher observes that there are numerous challenges surrounding maritime boundary delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean, including some countries' refusal to sign the **1982 UNCLOS**. While many regional states have signed bilateral delimitation agreements, Turkey has not recognized these agreements. Working through the United Nations Security Council could provide stability for other regional countries, pushing Turkey and Israel to join UNCLOS and organizing UN-sponsored regional conferences to facilitate negotiations between Turkey and Cyprus to avoid future military confrontations.

## **2. Consensus Scenario:**

This scenario envisions a consensus among regional states on maritime boundary delimitation in accordance with international law, particularly given the regional and international pressure Turkey has faced. This could be achieved through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) established in Cairo, which includes **seven** member states and is open to other countries in the region <sup>lxx</sup>.

The researcher believes this scenario is feasible as states in the region recognize the potential risks of escalation, which could threaten regional and international security without mutual benefits from newly discovered gas resources.

## **3. Escalation and Military Confrontation Scenario:**

The Middle East has historically been a hotspot for disputes and conflicts between countries. One of the long-standing issues in the Eastern Mediterranean is the Greek-Turkish dispute, influenced by global politics and dating back to the formation of both states. This traditional conflict has often manifested as a frozen dispute or a "cold war," and the natural resources discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean have intensified the conflict, bringing it back into focus. Regional actors have also contributed to escalating the conflict <sup>lxxi</sup>.

In **2018**, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean escalated significantly, particularly between Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus on one side and Lebanon and Israel on the other. This resulted from competition among these states to exploit natural resources, especially natural gas. Given this tension and the resulting alliances, competition in the Eastern Mediterranean could evolve into a new conflict with different geopolitical and strategic dimensions, particularly as political and economic ambitions of these states intertwine over claims to energy dominance in the region's overlapping maritime and energy interests <sup>lxxii</sup>.

The researcher notes that gas resources are not the only factor fueling conflicts between regional countries; they have added a new dimension to long-standing tensions. Turkey's disputes with Cyprus and Greece over Aegean islands and with Egypt over its support for opposition groups have complicated sovereignty issues over gas exploration rights. Turkey has also signaled its influence within NATO to pressure the United States against fully siding with Greece, Greek Cyprus, and Israel <sup>lxxiii</sup>.

Indicators of this escalation include Greek Prime Minister's speech at the **75th UN General Assembly** in September **2020**, where he accused Turkey of responding to dialogue and diplomacy offers with escalation, endangering regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean. He warned that if Turkey did not de-escalate and return to exploratory negotiations suspended since **2016**, Greece would turn to the International Court of Justice for resolution of sovereignty-related disputes <sup>lxxiv</sup>.

Despite continued escalation and military skirmishes and the absence of a comprehensive cooperation framework, the researcher believes a full-scale conflict in the region is unlikely. Various internal, regional, and international constraints are in place, with recent

rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt being a notable example. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Egypt in **February 2024** underscores these developments as a positive step toward regional stability.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The Eastern Mediterranean is one of the most geostrategically significant regions due to its substantial economic resources, which have the potential to escalate regional and international conflicts over recent gas discoveries. This has increased tensions among the countries in this area, with many seeking to formalize their maritime boundaries in compliance with the **1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea**.

Based on the research conducted on the impact of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean on the basin countries and the implications of these discoveries for maritime boundary delimitation among countries in the region (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, Libya, Egypt, and Palestine), the study reached several conclusions:

- ✓ The discovery of offshore gas and oil reservoirs in the Mediterranean Sea could lead to armed conflicts over ownership among regional countries, as these discoveries present both opportunities and challenges.
- ✓ There are numerous issues concerning maritime boundary delimitation in this region, especially since some countries have not signed the **1982 UNCLOS**. Despite the trend of many countries in the region signing bilateral boundary agreements, Turkey has not recognized these agreements and has attempted to establish a new status quo to exploit newly discovered resources.
- ✓ The recent resource discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have intensified conflict rather than fostering cooperation.
- ✓ Maritime boundary delimitation remains a critical factor in regional disputes, especially due to the vast oil and gas fields, some of which are located in contested areas, such as between Cyprus and Israel, Cyprus and Egypt, and Israel and Lebanon.

## **Recommendations:**

- It is in the interest of all regional parties to ensure that tensions do not escalate into a full-scale conflict, thereby safeguarding comprehensive energy security.
- A comprehensive strategy should be developed to manage the energy sector, especially natural gas, over the coming years. This strategy should include clear objectives, defined mechanisms, and a timeline. It should also incorporate a scientific approach for periodic evaluation and review to assess its effectiveness in achieving goals and alignment with global and regional energy trends and scientific management practices.

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