



**Dimensions**  
for Strategic Studies

Analytical report



# Geopolitical Dynamics of the Gas Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin

By: BASHAR NARSH

November 2023

[www.dimensionscenter.net](http://www.dimensionscenter.net)



## **Dimensions** for Strategic Studies

Dimensions Centre for Strategic Studies (DCSS) is think tank, dedicated to the study of the Middle East and North Africa affairs, provides the Arab readers with a substantive insight on the region's political, economic and social issues and dynamics.

The DCSS was founded in the United Kingdom on January 1, 2020, and is headquartered in London.

Dimensions Center for Strategic Studies is interested in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) affairs in particular, addressing influences the region has and the effects of this region's interactions with the rest of the world.

We strive to provide an open and accessible space in order to inform relevant persons of experts and academic readers alike, in a simplified style far from the complexities brought by experts, technicians and academics.

We are keen to provide topics in an intensive manner that goes in line with the challenges of modern times and in brief way which can meet the needs of researchers and readers as well.

<https://dimensionscenter.net/>

---

All rights Reserved DCSS.2023  
[info@dimensionscenter.net](mailto:info@dimensionscenter.net)



# Contents

Introduction: .....	4
The Geopolitical Dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin: .....	5
Points of Tension and Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin: .....	8
The Israeli-Lebanese Conflict: .....	8
The Turkish conflict with Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt: .....	9
Outcomes and Dynamics of the Gas Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin: .....	13
Analyzing Major Powers' Approach to Mediterranean Gas: .....	13
Outcomes and Dynamics of the Local Conflict: .....	15
Conclusion: .....	17



## INTRODUCTION

Oil and gas rank among the most economically significant resources closely intertwined with global political conflicts. This connection makes the discovery of a new field a globally significant event. The Eastern Mediterranean Basin is no exception to this rule. Since 2009, a series of gas discoveries in this area have transformed it into a geopolitical tug-of-war zone among various regional and international powers. This situation truly reflects the blatant contest of interests centered on gaining influence and controlling resources. Consequently, this has opened the door to a new chapter of conflict in a region already beset with multiple disputes and political and demographic challenges for various reasons.

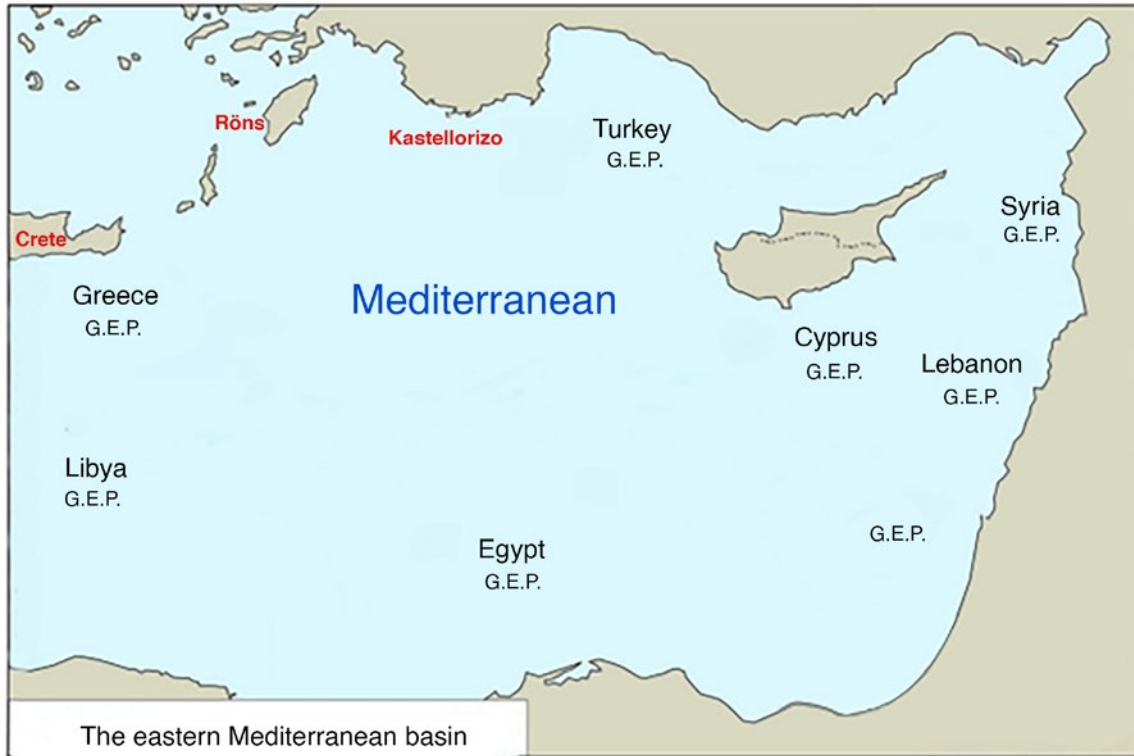
This report aims to illuminate the geopolitical dimension of the conflict over gas in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. It delves into the region's significant gas discoveries and their affiliations, highlighting the key local reactions, whether in the form of disputes or bilateral and multilateral alignments. The core focus is on the demarcation of maritime boundaries and the overlap of economic zones among neighboring and adjacent countries. The report concludes by analyzing how international powers have been dealing with these discoveries and the conflicts in the region.

## THE GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN:

Geopolitical factors are among the most crucial elements influencing the internal and external trajectories, directions, and goals of nations in their local and international interactions. At the forefront of these factors is geographical location, which is of paramount importance. Analyzing the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin's geographical location, comprising three main sub-basins - the Aegean Sea, the Levant (Eastern Mediterranean), and the Nile Delta- reveals a critical aspect. This significance stems from the broader geographical importance of the region in which the Eastern Mediterranean Basin is situated, known as the 'Middle East.' This area is geopolitically significant globally due to its pivotal geographic position, which affects the interests of many regional and international powers, and is a hotspot for wealth, conflicts, and disputes.

On one hand, this region lies at the crossroads of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa, thus serving as a crucial commercial hub for global trade, including the transit of oil and natural gas from the Middle East to European markets. The significance of this area is further highlighted by its encompassment of two world-important straits: the Bosphorus Strait in Turkey, and the Suez Canal.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> المعادلة الإستراتيجية الجديدة في الشرق الأوسط، أفرام عنبار، مركز باحث للدراسات الفلسطينية والإستراتيجية، 1 تشرين الثاني/نوفمبر 2014، الرابط. [الرابط](#)



On the other hand, this region also serves as a vital zone for monitoring military and other events in the 'Middle East'. Additionally, it plays a crucial role as a buffer zone against emerging threats from the Middle East towards Europe, especially concerning illegal migration across the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it can be said that this region has gained significant geostrategic importance, further elevated after the discovery of its gas reserves. In 2010, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimated these reserves to be around 345 trillion cubic feet of gas, with 223 trillion cubic feet in the Nile Delta Basin and 122 trillion cubic feet in the Levant Basin, along with approximately 3.4 billion barrels of oil.<sup>3</sup>

The following table provides details on the key gas fields discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin over recent years.

2 تركيا وتطور الهوية الجيوستراتيجية لمنطقة شرق المتوسط، آية عبد العزيز، المركز العربي للبحوث والدراسات، 23 أيار/ مايو 2019. [الرابط](#)

3 US DEPARTMENT of the Interior, "Levant basin holds 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas," U.S. Geological Survey Fact Sheet 2010–3014, March 2010-April 10, 2010.

Discovered Gas Fields in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin				
	Country	Field	Discovery Date	Reserves (Trillion Cubic Feet)
1	Egypt	Temsah	1999	3.9
2	"Israel"	Marie	2000	1.1
3	"Israel"	Tamar	2009	11
4	"Israel"	Leviathan	2010	18
5	Cyprus	Aphrodite	2011	5
6	"Israel"	Tanin	2012	1.2
7	"Israel"	Samson	2012	3.5
8	"Israel"	Karesh	2013	2.5
9	Egypt	Salamat	2013	1.6
10	"Israel"	Roy	2014	3.2
11	Egypt	North Alexandria	2014	5
12	Egypt	Dhahar	2015	30
13	Egypt	Atoll	2015	1.5
14	Egypt	Nawras	2015	2
15	Egypt	Nidoku	2015	1.7
16	Egypt	Baltim	2016	1.3
17	Cyprus	Calypso	2018	3
18	Cyprus	Glaftos-1	2019	5-8
19	Cyprus	Cronos	2022	2.5

**Source:** The researcher collected information from various sources<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> أبرزها، خريطة الصراع على الثروات النفطية في شرق البحر المتوسط، لميس عاصي، العربي الجديد، 18 شباط/ فبراير 2018، [الرابط](#)، وكذلك، خرائط استكشاف حوض شرق المتوسط، مارك أيوب، موقع صفر، 19 كانون الأول/ ديسمبر 2022، [الرابط](#)

## POINTS OF TENSION AND CONFLICT IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN:

The Eastern Mediterranean Basin witnesses several points of tension and conflict linked to the region's gas discoveries. These conflicts are associated with the demarcation of maritime boundaries between the countries of the region and the overlapping of exploration areas. Key among these conflicts are:

### The Israeli-Lebanese Conflict:

It is one of the oldest conflicts, originally linked to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. It has a dual nature; on one hand, it concerns the dispute over maritime boundary delineation between the two parties, and on the other hand, it is connected to the overlap of gas fields between them, particularly regarding the Karish and Qana fields<sup>5</sup>.

This conflict ignited a geopolitical dispute that nearly led to military confrontations multiple times, particularly involving Lebanon. In July 2011, Israel submitted maritime maps to the United Nations, which included its vision of the northern maritime boundaries with Lebanon. This submission clearly encroached upon Lebanese rights, violating its territorial waters by pushing the maritime border marker 15 kilometers northwards at line 23. This act annexed about 860 square kilometers of the Lebanese maritime area, encompassing the Lebanese Qana gas field and overlapping with Israel's Karish field.<sup>6</sup> The conflict and tension persisted until the United States managed to bring the parties together in indirect negotiations in 2020, mediated by the American envoy Amos Hochstein, lasting nearly two years.

<sup>5</sup> غاز المتوسط وأبعاد الصراع في الشرق الأوسط، بشار نرش، مدونات الجزيرة، 10 شباط/ فبراير 2020، [الرابط](#)

<sup>6</sup> حرب خرائط ترسيم الحدود، إسرائيل تتهم لبنان بتغيير موقفه 7 مرات، فرانس برس، 20 تشرين الثاني/ نوفمبر 2020، [الرابط](#)



This led to an agreement<sup>7</sup> on October 27, 2022, to demarcate the maritime boundaries between them. As a result, Israel obtained full rights to the Karish field, while Lebanon acquired the Qana field, with financial compensation paid to Israel by the French company Total and the Italian company Eni, responsible for the discovery and development of the field, as part of it lies outside Lebanese territorial waters.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it can be said that reaching the maritime boundary demarcation agreement between Lebanon and Israel has somewhat alleviated Israel's security risks. This concerns Hezbollah's threat to target the Karish field if Israel began extracting gas before reaching an agreement with Lebanon. The agreement allowed Israel to resume operations in the Karish field without obstacles. Meanwhile, Lebanon remains in a state of anticipation, awaiting the commencement of operations in the Qana field, which will require years before gas extraction can begin<sup>9</sup>.

### The Israeli-Lebanese Conflict:

Turkey represents the main party in this conflict, while the other parties include Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. On one hand, there is a dispute between Turkey and Southern Cyprus, related to the 'Cypriot-Greek-Egyptian' axis. This conflict is partly tied to Southern Cyprus's efforts to exploit the region's gas resources without considering the interests of Turkish Cyprus, particularly after Southern Cyprus demarcated its maritime borders with Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt, and began unilaterally exploiting the discovered resources in the region.<sup>10</sup>

This conflict also has another dimension related to Turkey's counter-movements against its opposing group in the region, represented by the countries of the 'East Mediterranean Gas Forum,' which was

7 للاطلاع على كامل الاتفاق يمكن الدخول إلى، [الرابط](#)

8 AGREEMENT TO DEMARCATHE THE MARITIME BORDERS BETWEEN LEBANON AND ISRAEL, HAMZA HUSSEIN, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT, OCTOBER 31, 2022, [link](#)

9 LEBANESE HOPES ACCOMPANY THE ARRIVAL OF AN OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION SHIP, ASHARQ AL-AWSAT NEWSPAPER, AUGUST 14, 2023, [link](#)

10 NEW MAP OF MEDITERRANEAN GAS, THE ESCALATION OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TURKEY, CYPRUS AND EGYPT, AL-ARABI AL-JADEED, FEBRUARY 14, 2018, [link](#)

transformed in 2021 into the 'East Mediterranean Gas Organization.' This organization includes Egypt, Southern Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Jordan, and Italy.<sup>11</sup>

A conflict as such led Turkey to take a series of actions in the region, which included:

- Demarcating its maritime borders with Turkish Cyprus in 2011, resulting in an overlap in the economic zones of Turkey, Turkish Cyprus, and Southern Cyprus.
- Dispatching a fleet of Turkish exploration vessels to operate in the disputed areas.<sup>12</sup>
- Signing two memoranda of understanding with the Libyan government in November 2019. The first concerned security and military cooperation, while the second dealt with sharing maritime sovereignty between the two nations in the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> This agreement allowed Turkey to separate the territorial waters of Southern Cyprus and Greece, expanding its economic waters in the basin from 43,000 square kilometers to 190,000 square kilometers.<sup>14</sup>

This agreement caused significant tension between Turkey and Libya on one side and Southern Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt on the other, escalating to the point where Greece expelled the Libyan ambassador in December 2019<sup>15</sup>. This tension nearly escalated into a military conflict in early 2020 between Turkey and Libya against Greece and Southern Cyprus, with France, Egypt, and the UAE supporting the latter. This was because the agreement contradicted the strategy of these countries to isolate Turkey in the region

<sup>11</sup> EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN GAS ORGANIZATION, CONNOTATIONS AND MESSAGES, BASHAR NARSH, AL JAZEERA BLOGS, SEPTEMBER 30, 2020, [link](#)

<sup>12</sup> THE TURKISH YAVUZ SHIP BEGINS NEW EXCAVATION WORK IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, TRT ARABIC, OCTOBER 3, 2019, [link](#)

<sup>13</sup> TO VIEW THE FULL TEXT OF THE UNDERSTANDING REGARDING DETERMINING AREAS OF MARITIME JURISDICTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, CLICK THE [link](#)

<sup>14</sup> THIS ESCALATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN, BASHAR NARSH, AL-ARABI AL-JADEED NEWSPAPER, DECEMBER 14, 2019, [link](#)

<sup>15</sup> THE EXPULSION OF THE LIBYAN AMBASSADOR FROM GREECE DUE TO A MARITIME AGREEMENT BETWEEN HIS COUNTRY AND TURKEY, BBC ARABIC, DECEMBER 6, 2019, [link](#)

and gave Turkey a prominent position in the Libyan dossier. As a result, relations between Turkey and these nations, especially Egypt, became increasingly strained. Egypt resorted to signing a maritime boundary demarcation agreement with Greece in August 2020<sup>16</sup>. The 'Turkish-Egyptian' tensions persisted until the two sides normalized relations again, following a handshake between the presidents of both countries during the World Cup in Qatar on November 20, 2022, and subsequent visits by the foreign ministers of both countries, including Egypt's provision of relief aid to Turkey's earthquake victims in February 2023 and the Turkish foreign minister's visit to Cairo in mid-March 2023.<sup>17</sup> Diplomatic relations were fully restored with the appointment of ambassadors after a ten-year break. However, several sensitive unresolved issues between the two countries remain, including the status of the Egyptian opposition in Turkey, Turkey's military presence in Libya, and

- On the 'Energy-Economic' front: This centers on the natural gas reserves nestled within the region. It's not just about the gas itself; it's about the strategic clout that comes with proximity to these energy goldmines and the corridors through which they flow. This axis isn't merely a geological feature – it's a potential economic game-changer, promising to reshape the region's fiscal landscape with its lucrative revenue streams. Moreover, in a world where Western sanctions against Moscow have strained Russian gas supply lines to Europe, the region's gas reserves stand poised to fill in the gaps, potentially altering Europe's energy map in the wake of the Ukraine conflict.
- As for the military axis: This facet revolves around pushing the envelope in terms of proximity to and intimate surveillance of certain powers. It's about keeping a close watch on the military cooperation axes among these powers, and their relationships with other

<sup>16</sup> SIGNING OF THE MARITIME BORDER DEMARCATION AGREEMENT BETWEEN EGYPT AND GREECE: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR TURKEY, AL-ARABI AL-JADEED, AUGUST 6, 2020, [link](#)

<sup>17</sup> TURKEY AND EGYPT SEEK TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS AND ASPIRE TO A REGIONAL ALLIANCE, AL JAZEERA, APRIL 13, 2023, [link](#)



countries. A key example is the Turkish military presence in Libya following the signing of the security and military cooperation memorandum between the two nations. This move, among other things, aimed to assert Turkey's role in the region and thwart attempts to isolate it. By bringing Libya into the regional equation in the Eastern Mediterranean alongside Turkey, it strategically disrupts the plans of Turkey's adversaries, adding a wildcard to the regional power play.

## OUTCOMES AND DYNAMICS OF THE GAS CONFLICT IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN:

The aforementioned conflicts and disputes have raised a host of questions about the future of the region, the prospects for cooperation and conflict among its players. To address this, an analysis of how major powers are dealing with these discoveries and conflicts is essential. This will set the stage for foreseeing the eventual outcomes and the ongoing struggle in the region.

### Analyzing Major Powers' Approach to Mediterranean Gas:

It's undeniable that the erupting conflicts in the region will intensify the involvement of external parties, each drawn into these disputes with geopolitical motives unique to their interests. Thus, the patterns of engagement of each major power differ, tailored to their own interests and objectives.

Despite the fact that the region's gas does not yet rival Russian gas in terms of production volumes, Russia's presence in the area is strongly felt. This influence extends through its corporations, bilateral agreements with regional countries, and its direct military presence in Syria. Russia aims to be a fundamental part of the region's energy map, whether through extraction and investment or through transportation channels. Recognizing Syria's geographical importance as a potential site for pipeline networks from the Gulf and Iran towards Turkey and Europe, Russia has bolstered its position in Syria. This move is a strategic bid to ensure it remains a decisive player in any matters related to the exploitation, production, and transportation of Mediterranean gas. Hence, Russia has secured exclusive exploitation contracts with the Syrian regime for gas and oil exploration in Syrian waters, positioning itself as a key player in future arrangements.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> NATURAL GAS DISCOVERIES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, ANTICIPATING GEOPOLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES, MARWAN QABALAN, ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY STUDIES, OCTOBER 25, 2018, [link](#)



Russia's primary goal in the region is to be a major partner in gas projects, securing a share of profits from the fields for its companies and ensuring its monopoly in the European market. Russia aims to be involved in any complementary or alternative gas projects, preventing Mediterranean gas from becoming a future competitor, especially in Southern Europe.

As for the United States, it has a different approach. The U.S. views the region through a broader lens, aligning with its priorities in the Middle East as a whole, intersecting with three main issues: Israel's security, the Cyprus division issue, and energy security. The U.S. perceives the region's gas as bolstering Israel's energy security, thus supporting its economic and military superiority. Therefore, it mediated the Lebanese-Israeli conflict resolution and encouraged Israeli-Cypriot-Greek coordination for gas export to Europe. This led to the passage of the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act in the U.S. Congress in June 2019, aimed at establishing an American Eastern Mediterranean Energy Center to facilitate energy cooperation between the U.S., Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, and to enhance security and energy cooperation with the region's countries.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the European Union also stands as a key player in the region, either through member states like Southern Cyprus and Greece or via European exploration companies. The EU's primary focus regarding the region's gas lies in bolstering energy security by diversifying import sources, a need that has become particularly acute following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This situation has compelled Europe, in particular, to scout for alternative gas sources to compensate for the shortfall in Russian supplies<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, the European Union's engagement in the region is a strategic endeavor to lessen its dependency on Russian gas as much as possible. This involves seeking alternative sources of gas and initiating new projects to transport gas from the region to their markets, which are continually growing in demand due to a mix of economic, political, and environmental factors.

<sup>19</sup> "MILITARIZING THE CONFLICT OVER RESOURCES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN," ALI HUSSEIN BAKIR, SYRIA TV WEBSITE, JULY 29, 2019, [link](#)

<sup>20</sup> EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN EXPLORATION GUIDE, MARK AYOUB, SAFAR WEBSITE, DECEMBER 19, 2022, [link](#)

## Outcomes and Dynamics of the Local Conflict:

Regarding the future outcomes of the local conflict, the situation is open to several complex propositions in terms of calculations and consequences, especially given the multiple parties involved in this strife.

In terms of the Lebanese-Israeli conflict, forecasts indicate that the likelihood of renewed conflict between the two parties is low in the short to medium term. This is primarily due to both parties finding solid economic interests in maintaining peace in their shared areas. However, the possibility of these conflicts reigniting in the long term remains a concern. The reason is that the agreement is still incomplete, being limited in scope without a clear mechanism for implementation or resolution of potential disputes. Moreover, the agreement has not resolved all maritime boundary disputes, as the easternmost point of the maritime boundary line remains undefined due to the absence of a land border demarcation agreement between them.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, considering the context, timing, and terms of the agreement, it can be said: At best, this agreement will temporarily ease tensions along the Lebanese-Israeli land and maritime borders. However, it's unlikely to prevent future conflicts in the long run, as contentious issues may resurface despite the emergence of a new mutual interest in maintaining the status quo.

Regarding the outcomes of the second conflict, in which Turkey is a primary party, the situation is also open to numerous possibilities, the most significant of which are:

- A scenario involving a diplomatic solution acceptable to all parties is on the table. However, this outcome requires time to develop, especially given the new direction of Turkey's foreign policy, which focuses on resolving conflicts and tensions with regional countries through diplomatic means. The proposed Egyptian mediation by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos

<sup>21</sup> Demarcating the maritime borders between Lebanon and Israel, a decisive step and a fragile agreement, Joe Macaron, Orian 21 website, October 25, 2022, [link](#)

Mitsotakis during his recent visit to Egypt, aimed at organizing a quadrilateral summit (Egyptian-Turkish-Greek-Cypriot) to discuss tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean <sup>22</sup>, could serve as an initial step towards this scenario. This summit would focus on narrowing differences over maritime boundary demarcation and discussing the potential inclusion of Turkey in the East Mediterranean Gas Organization.

- Continuation of conflicts and tensions in the region, a scenario that seems more likely in the short term. This is detrimental for all countries involved, as optimal utilization of the region's wealth requires a regional, rather than national, perspective. The countries in the region should consider gas as an economic lever for the collective benefit of all, rather than focusing solely on individual national gains.
- The possibility of armed conflict erupting between some regional countries, while unlikely in the short to medium term, remains a potential long-term outcome. This scenario could unfold, particularly if some nations rigidly maintain their opposition to cooperation, and as gas discoveries continue to overlap in various economic zones of different countries.

In light of all the aforementioned points, it can be said: A diplomatic resolution to the region's disputes remains the most suitable approach if the regional countries aim to optimally benefit from their resources. This also includes leveraging the gas pipeline networks towards consumer nations, thereby playing a significant and influential future role in the global energy landscape.

<sup>22</sup> Proposal for an “Egyptian - Turkish - Greek - Cypriot” summit, Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, August 5, 2023, [link](#)



## CONCLUSION

Since the discovery of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, the region has gained significant prominence. However, this discovery has also fueled additional conflict in an area already rife with disputes and disagreements. The discovery has reshaped relationships among the regional countries, forming new alliances and initiatives on one hand and fostering hostility and conflicts on the other. This has been evident in the varying degrees of interactions among these nations over the past years, ranging from exchanges of statements to threats of military force, and sometimes actual use of it.

Despite these conflicts and disputes, Israel has emerged as the party most benefiting from the region's resources. Egypt, with its major gas discovery at the Zohr field, is developing an ambitious strategy to rapidly exploit these findings and enter production as soon as possible, aiming for self-sufficiency and exporting surplus. Southern Cyprus, despite ongoing conflicts with Turkey and Northern Cyprus, is seeking to exploit its gas discoveries for export purposes, either through pipelines or liquefaction to global markets. Lebanon, officially entering the race for exploration and discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2018, hopes that the maritime boundary demarcation agreement with Israel will positively contribute to meeting its future domestic market needs. Syria, amidst its current conditions and under Russian influence, remains outside the investment and exploration race.



# Dimensions

for Strategic Studies

 \DimensionsCTR

 \DimensionsCTR

 \dimensionscenter

 \dimensionscenter

---

[info@dimensionscenter.net](mailto:info@dimensionscenter.net)