From Tartous to Tobruk

The Return of Russian Sea Power in the Eastern Mediterranean

Jonas Kjellén, Aron Lund

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Cover: Russian Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine transiting the Bosporus strait southbound (Shutterstock).

Sammanfattning

Interventionen i Syrien 2015 inledde en ny era i Rysslands militära engagemang i östra Medelhavet. Fram till dess hade den ryska marinen under en längre tid gradvis ökat sin närvaro i regionen, för att 2013 skapa ett fartygsförband underställt Svartahavsflottan med permanent basering i Medelhavet. Likheten med Sovjetunionens motsvarighet, 5. Medelhavseskadern 1967–92, är slående och sannolikt avsiktlig, då den marina närvaron var central för Moskvas förmåga att värna sina intressen i regionen. Sedan dess har östra Medelhavsregionen emellertid förändrats avsevärt. Dess betydelse för världshandeln har ökat, medan nya energifyndigheter tilldrar sig internationellt intresse. Samtidigt spelar regionala stater nu en mer självständig roll i ett område präglat av såväl gamla som nya problem, från Cypern till de arabisk-israeliska konflikterna och krigen i Syrien och Libyen. Under 2010-talet har regionen polariserats mellan Turkiet och tre andra nyckelaktörer – Grekland, Israel och Egypten – vilket bidragit till nya allianser och marin kapprustning. Genom sin permanenta marina närvaro kan Moskva utöva inflytande i en viktig och konflikttyngd region stadd i snabb förändring, vilket framstår som det troliga huvudsyftet. I detta skiljer sig de ryska motiven från Sovjetmarinens huvudambition, att möta USA/NATO. På längre sikt framstår en fortsatt rysk expansion mot Indiska oceanen som sannolik.

Nyckelord: Cypern, Egypten, EMGF, Grekland, havsrätt, Hmeymim, Israel, Libanon, Libyen, marinstridskrafter, maritim säkerhet, Medelhavet, Montreuxkonventionen, Palestina, Ryssland, Suezkanalen, Syrien, Tartous, Turkiet, UNCLOS

Abstract

The 2015 intervention in Syria marked a new era in Russia's military engagement in the eastern Mediterranean region. Over the years, the Russian Navy had gradually increased its presence, culminating in the 2013 formation of a permanent Mediterranean Task Force subordinated to the Black Sea Fleet. The striking similarities to the 1967–92 Soviet equivalent, the 5th Mediterranian Squadron, are likely intentional, since naval power was central to Moscow's ability to pursue regional interests. Since then, however, the eastern Mediterranean region has changed considerably. Its role in world trade has increased, and new energy discoveries have drawn international attention. Regional states act more autonomously in an area beset by new and old problems, from Cyprus to the Arab-Israeli, Syrian, and Libyan conflicts. In the 2010s, the region polarised between Turkey and three other key actors – Greece, Israel, and Egypt – contributing to new alliances and a naval arms race. Through its permanent naval presence, Moscow can influence an important, conflict-prone region subject to rapid change. This is likely Russia's main goal, in contrast to the Soviet Navy's main ambition of countering the United States and NATO. In a longer perspective, continued Russian expansion toward the Indian Ocean appears likely.

Keywords: Cyprus, Egypt, EMGF, Greece, Hmeymim, Israel, Law of the Sea, Lebanon, Libya, Maritime Security, Mediterranean Sea, Montreux Convention, Naval Forces, Navy, Palestine, Russia, Suez Canal, Syria, Tartous, Turkey, UNCLOS

Executive Summary

The 2015 intervention in Syria marked a return of Moscow's military power in the Middle East, but it was not the only major change in Russia's military posture in the eastern Mediterranean region. Already two years earlier, the Russian Navy had created a standing task force in the Mediterranean Sea, reinstating a strategy to maintain a permanent naval presence that had been lost two decades prior with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

This report describes the fluid political and security environment of the eastern Mediterranean region, its primary actors, and how the Russian Navy has positioned itself to defend Moscow's interests and pursue new opportunities by naval means.

* * *

The eastern Mediterranean region – understood here to mean the crescent of littoral nations from Greece to eastern Libya, including Cyprus and the sea region joining them – is changing.

A commercial hub since antiquity, its importance to the global movement of goods has increased rapidly since the turn of the millennium. Globalisation means maritimisation, and in the eastern Mediterranean the effects of decades of growing world trade has been a surge in maritime cargo traffic. The region is home to two of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal, which function as bottlenecks for food staples, container traffic, and petroleum products. As demonstrated by the March 2021 *Ever Given* incident, when a giant container ship became stuck in the Suez Canal, any disruption to their functioning will quickly rattle the global economy, creating problems across the world – from New York to Beijing, and from Stockholm to Lagos.

The eastern Mediterranean region's economic importance is not solely as an area of transit. Over the past decade, considerable seabed natural gas deposits have been discovered near Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus, adding yet another flammable element to an already volatile mix. The gas discoveries empower some actors at the expense of others and have revived lingering maritime boundary disputes, but they have also helped nurture new forms of cooperation.

In a region littered with old and unresolved conflicts – including the Turkish-Greek rivalry, the divided island of Cyprus, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the civil wars and rivalries that stem from the 2011 Arab Spring – no one actor reigns supreme. NATO's role in the region is hampered by the hostility between Turkey and Greece. To be sure, the United States still wields great influence, but there is a widespread sense in the region that Washington's gaze is drifting away, toward China and the Indo-Pacific region.

It is a moment for mid-level actors to make their mark – and one such country is clearly on a quest to expand its regional influence and crowd out other contenders.

During the two-decade rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has reoriented its foreign policy. Its armed forces – the largest non-American military force in NATO – have intervened in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. Since 2016, Erdogan has ramped up his anti-Western rhetoric and built a close but complicated relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, the Turkish Navy – the largest in the eastern Mediterranean region – has aggressively pursued Turkish maritime claims, threatening to attack Greek and Cypriot ships. Turkey has also used migration as a powerful point of pressure on the EU, most notably in 2015.

The result of Erdoğan's new, combative foreign policy has been a dramatic deterioration of Turkey's ties to the United States and the EU. Closer to home, a diverse coalition of states spread across the Mediterranean region and the Middle East have come together to thwart Turkey's ambitions. A key element in this anti-Turkish balancing is the new and unprecedented Greek-Israeli-Egyptian partnership, which is joined also by Cyprus and by nations farther afield, such as France and the United Arab Emirates. All three core members of the new anti-Turkish axis have, for reasons of their own, shifted their foreign policies in recent years. They have also expanded their naval capabilities, both in response to Turkey's military build-up and to the proliferation of new threats and opportunities that stem from rising maritime trade volumes and new energy interests. One result of their collaboration is the 2020 establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), whose plans for export to the EU rival Turkey's own strategic bid to host the EU's southern gas transit corridor. In response, Ankara has reacted by redoubling its maritime provocations, targeting Greece and Cyprus.

* * *

It is into this uncertain, shifting, yet malleable environment that Russia has stepped through its re-established naval presence.

Already in 2013, Russia consolidated its naval posture in the Mediterranean by organising a permanent Mediterranean Task Force amounting to at least ten naval vessels at any given time. Naval operations increased further in 2015, when Moscow intervened directly in Syria and established the Hmeymim Air Base, near Latakia. Since then, Russia has also expanded and upgraded its existing naval base in nearby Tartous.

While this enhanced Russian naval posture seemingly came in response to the Arab Spring events, the creation of a permanent naval task force echoes Soviet posturing during the Cold War.

In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union launched a Mediterranean build up that would allow it to sustain a robust permanent naval presence in the region for the remainder of the Cold War. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet force was primarily occupied with counterbalancing Western navies in the area, particularly the US Sixth Fleet. The permanent presence also provided Moscow with the means

to swiftly respond to regional crises, such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, but the Soviet Navy struggled to secure a logistical base for its operations. It was not until the 1980s that Syria finally offered a port in Tartous for Soviet use. Within years, however, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought the naval presence in the Mediterranean to a halt and initiated a two-decades-long decline of the ex-Soviet naval assets inherited by the young Russian Federation.

In recent years, the pendulum has swung back. Russia now seeks to emulate the purposeful use of Soviet naval forces in the 1970 and 1980s, aiming to underwrite its regional strategy through the projection of sea power and to force other actors in the rapidly changing eastern Mediterranean theatre to take Moscow's interests into account. Signs also point to Russian ambitions to expand further, toward the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region.

Although the reintroduced Mediterranean Task Force remains numerically smaller than its Soviet-era counterpart, the significantly upgraded Russian facilities in Tartous and the new Hmeymim base now provide far better onshore naval support than what was available to the Soviet Navy. As a result, Russia finds itself well positioned to pursue its national interests in the wider Mediterranean region, and perhaps even farther afield.

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Terms and Abbreviations

Big Four	The major eastern Mediterranean states: Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt.
East Med	A proposed Israel-Cyprus-Greece-Italy undersea gas pipeline.
Eastern Mediterranean	Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, eastern Libya and the sea connecting them, including maritime subregions, such as the Aegean Sea and the Levantine Sea.
5th Mediterranean Squadron	A Soviet naval unit responsible for Mediterranean operations, 1967–92.
Mediterranean Task Force	A Russian naval unit responsible for Mediterranean operations since 2013.

AKP	*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*: Justice and Development Party
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EMGF	East Mediterranean Gas Forum
EU	European Union
Hamas	*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*: Islamic Resistance Movement
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
M	Nautical mile = 1,852 kilometres
PKK	*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*: Kurdistan Workers' Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
SUMED	Suez-Mediterranean pipeline (Egypt)
SYRIZA	*Sinaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás*: Coalition of the Radical Left
TPAO	*Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı*: Turkish Petroleum Corporation
TRNC	Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNDOF	United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
UNFICYP	United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNTSO	United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation
USA	United States of America

1 About the Report

This report, which is a joint product of the Russia and Eurasia Studies (RUFS) and Asia and Middle East programmes at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), seeks to trace the evolution of Russia's naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean region and chart the environment it operates in, by describing relevant issues, risks, and opportunities and profiling key regional actors.

It is the latest in a series of recent FOI publications covering issues related to Russian maritime and naval affairs. Past publications include a report on the Russian Baltic Fleet (February 2021), a short memo on the Montreux Convention (April 2021), a report on sea power in the Indo-Pacific region (September 2021; in Swedish), and an in-depth analysis of Russian naval shipbuilding (November 2021).[1]

Aim and Purpose

This report is primarily an exploratory study that aims to investigate Russia's re-establishment of a permanent naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, the political/security environment of that region, and Russia's current and emerging interests and interactions with regional actors. Among these actors, we focus in particular on four key nations: Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt.

In a concluding analysis, we seek to assess the future trajectory of Russian naval power in the Mediterranean, in light of how it was re-established in 2013 and has evolved until early 2021.

In so doing, we hope to facilitate and encourage continued study of the impact of Russian naval power on eastern Mediterranean security and how Moscow's growing maritime footprint is perceived by regional actors.

Methodology and Sources

The present report relies on publicly available secondary sources, including specialised literature, academic articles, think tank publications, newspaper reporting, and other media in Swedish, English, Russian, Arabic, French, and Greek.

Given the scarcity of up-to-date specialised literature on the area as a whole, the presentation in Chapter 2 of contemporary actors and events in the eastern Mediterranean region has been constructed from a variety of such sources, with an emphasis on English and Arabic academic, think tank, and media reporting. This method has been deemed sufficient to offer a broad survey of key regional actors

[1] Kjellén 2021; Lund 2021; Englund *et al.* 2021; Malmlöf 2021.

(Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt) and issues (trade/chokepoints, energy, and the primary conflict clusters).

The second part of the report goes into greater detail as it describes and analyses the Russian naval build-up in the Mediterranean. Chapter 3 provides a historical background on the Soviet Union's approach to the eastern Mediterranean; it then charts Moscow's post-Cold War withdrawal from the region and finishes with a detailed survey of Russia's return in the 2010s.

The Russian military is notoriously opaque and difficult to study. However, the report relies in part on prior FOI research, and finding additional information on these matters has in some ways been less challenging than expected.[2] International interest in Syria's civil war and Russia's 2015 intervention there has ensured that Moscow's naval activities in the Mediterranean have been well-covered in Russian and international media. In addition, transits of Russian warships through the Bosporus from the Black Sea – the natural staging area for its eastern Mediterranean operations – are closely followed by amateur ship spotters, whose detailed information help track naval movements.

The authors would like to thank Per Wikström (FOI), who designed all maps; Marianna Serveta (FOI), who contributed valuable Greek-language research, translation, and fact-checking, in addition to editing the report; Dr Richard Langlais, who language-edited the final text; Samuel Neuman Bergenwall (FOI), who reviewed the manuscript; and Dr Aaron Stein, director of research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, USA, who kindly agreed to serve as an external expert reviewer.

Limitations

For the purposes of this report, the eastern Mediterranean region is defined as Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and eastern Libya. It also includes the sea connecting them.

While Russia can use a broad range of military means to influence actors in the region, the focus in this report is on Russia's naval forces. Other aspects of Russian military power (e.g., military-technical cooperation and arms trade with countries in the region, the Russian air war in Syria, and Russia's use of private military companies in both Syria and Libya) are not studied or discussed here except in so far as they relate to the main subject of the report.

The decision to focus on the naval sphere is in part a practical one. It also helps in isolating the dimension of Russian military power that operates with the greatest independence from the regional environment. Although Russia's increased influence in the Middle East clearly owes much to the 2015 intervention in Syria and

[2] Kjellén 2018.

to the Hmeymim Air Base, it remains a fact that military air travel between Russia and the Mediterranean region depends on the permission of other governments (in practice, Iran and Iraq). By contrast, in peacetime, no other state can prevent Russia from projecting sea power into the eastern Mediterranean.

The report focuses in particular on four key littoral states: Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt. The choice of these four nations is based on several factors: their centrality to the regional security architecture, both in terms of geography and as independent actors; on the fact that all four possess significant and recently upgraded naval capabilities; and on their ability to influence Moscow's interests in the eastern Mediterranean region, including in matters pertaining to NATO's presence, Russian freedom of navigation, the wars in Libya and Syria, etc. Other regional states (e.g., Syria or Cyprus) can exercise influence as minor or niche actors, but are not spotlighted in this report. Similarly, although external actors such as the United States and France play a very significant role in the eastern Mediterranean (and in Russian military-strategic thinking), they are not treated here.

Disposition

This report consists of four chapters, each divided into sections and sub-sections, as needed.

Chapter 1 consists of this introductory section, with notes on methodology, sourcing, and so on.

Chapter 2 offers background and context for understanding the eastern Mediterranean region, highlighting relevant aspects such as its importance for international trade, the role of energy politics, and its many interlocking rivalries and conflicts. The chapter's closing section (2.4) is devoted to the four primary eastern Mediterranean state actors (Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt) with special attention paid to their maritime and naval affairs and their relations with Russia.

Chapter 3 examines Russia's naval assets in the eastern Mediterranean area. It first describes the history of Soviet and post-Cold War Russian naval deployments in the Mediterranean Sea. It then provides an in-depth study of the re-establishment and composition of Russia's permanent naval presence from 2013 onward, tracking its evolution through four successive phases, including a brief assessment of the future evolution of Russian naval power in – and projected from – the eastern Mediterranean.

Chapter 4 consists of a brief concluding analysis, including some thoughts on future areas of research.

2 The Eastern Mediterranean Region

Map 1. The Eastern Mediterranean Region

At the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the eastern Mediterranean region has given rise to ancient civilisations and religions. Today, it contains some of the world's most important shipping routes as well as two maritime chokepoints of great importance to global trade and security: the Turkish Straits, which hold the key to the Black Sea, and the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

As the volume of global shipping grows, not least in the form of Chinese trade with Europe and the United States, so does the importance of the eastern Mediterranean. Migratory and energy flows also raise the stakes in the area: the EU's destabilising 2015 migration crisis has refocused attention on maritime border security and Turkish and Libyan migrant smuggling, while recently discovered natural gas deposits may position the area as a source of energy for European economies.

Last but not least, the eastern Mediterranean landscape is dotted with unresolved security issues, including the long-frozen conflict in Cyprus; the Israeli-Palestinian question; intra-Palestinian feuding; longstanding conflicts pitting Israel against Syria, Lebanon, and other Arab states; a jihadist insurgency on the Sinai Peninsula, in Egypt; a Kurdish insurgency in Turkey; major civil wars with multi-sided

foreign intervention in Syria and Libya; recurrent Israeli-Iranian shipping sabotage; a collapsing economy in Lebanon; and a variety of Turkish-Greek tensions. Complicating matters, most of the region's maritime boundaries are in dispute.[3]

The following chapter seeks to shed light on the security environment of the eastern Mediterranean by detailing its role in maritime trade, its role as an area of energy transit and production, and its many local conflicts and rivalries. Finally, it offers a brief look at the area's pre-eminent local state actors and naval powers: Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt.

2.1 Maritime Trade

The eastern Mediterranean plays a major role in global trade and energy security, as an area of transit between Europe, Africa, and Asia. Growing volumes of Asian-European and Asian-American shipping add to the region's importance and highlight the sensitivity of the Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits, two crucial maritime logistics chokepoints.

2.1.1 The Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits

The 193-km-long Suez Canal connects the eastern Mediterranean with the Red Sea across Egyptian territory. On the southern end of the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a 25-kilometre-wide gap between Somalia and Yemen, opens onto the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. Originally constructed by French engineers in 1869, the Suez Canal has been controlled by the Egyptian government since the 1950s.

The Turkish Straits consists of two narrow natural passages on either side of the Sea of Marmara. On its southern end, the Dardanelles Strait, also known as the Çanakkale Strait, allows access to the Mediterranean. On the northern end lies the Bosporus Strait, which divides the city of Istanbul and links the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea. The 1936 Montreux Convention mandates the free passage of merchant shipping through the straits, but places strict limits on naval forays into the Black Sea (see 2.4.1).

Both the canal and the straits are crucial trade bottlenecks. If the Suez-Red Sea route were blocked, it would force maritime trade to take a circuitous 3,500 nautical mile (6,480 km) detour around the African continent, incurring "a significantly longer transit time and significantly higher shipping costs."[4] Should the Turkish Straits be blocked, the situation would be even more dire, as there is no alternative sea lane.

[3] Baroudi 2020, p. 8.
[4] Bailey & Wellesley 2017, p.14.

The smooth functioning of these maritime passages is thus essential not only for the Egyptian and Turkish economies but for global trade in energy, food, and a variety of goods. Their importance has grown along with the expansion of global trade and the prevalence of just-in-time supply chains. Maritime shipping volumes have steadily increased since the end of the Cold War, with the global amount of seaborne goods unloaded nearly tripling since 1990.[5] The eastern Mediterranean region's most important trade link, the Suez Canal, recorded nearly a 50 per cent rise in its yearly cargo throughput between 2011 and 2019, from 692 to 1031 million tons.[6] These rising volumes reflect both European-Asian economic exchanges and the surging container trade between the United States and China.[7]

Heavy use and congestion place strains on both the Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits. The Turkish government has long voiced concern over the risks posed by the daily passage through central Istanbul of some 130 vessels, some of which carry Russian oil or other hazardous cargo.[8] In 2021, Turkey began the construction of a controversial new passage to bypass the Bosporus, named the Istanbul Canal (see 2.4.1).[9] For its part, Egypt launched a high-profile expansion project dubbed the "New Suez Canal" in 2014–15, which aimed to cut transit times and increase shipping volumes, with an eye to absorbing the growing east-west trade flows.[10] After an accident blocked the canal for several days in March 2021 (see 2.1.2), Cairo announced another round of expansions.[11]

Pressure on the Turkish Straits has subsided somewhat in recent years.[12] In the absence of other maritime transport options, the straits are nonetheless likely to remain heavily used. The Suez Canal could theoretically see a long-term decline in income and traffic, should low oil prices improve the profitability of moving goods around Africa or, more likely in a longer perspective, if global warming facilitates a rerouting of east-west trade flows through the Arctic region.[13]

2.1.2 Food Trade Chokepoints

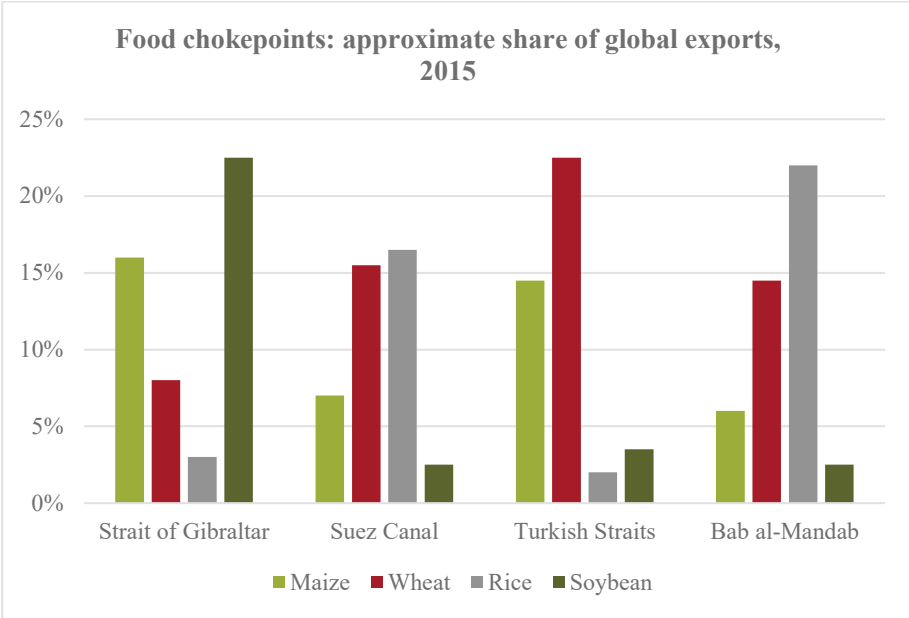
The critical role of Suez and the Turkish Straits is amply illustrated in a 2017 Chatham House report on world food trade chokepoints.[14]

As much as 12 per cent of the total world trade in grain passes through the Turkish Straits each day, including a fifth of global wheat exports and a sixth of global

[5] UNCTAD 2021.
[6] Suez Canal Authority (n.d.).
[7] Van der Putten 2016, p. 339.
[8] Turkish Foreign Ministry n.d.
[9] *Daily Sabah* 2019b.
[10] *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Online* 2015.
[11] Lewis 2021.
[12] *Economist* 2021.
[13] Malsin 2021.
[14] Bailey & Wellesley 2017.

maize exports.[15] Much of it comes from Russia, which is by far the world's largest grain exporter. Russian agricultural export revenues topped $20 billion in 2017, and one former minister of agriculture has referred to it as Russia's "second oil."[16] Other major producers who depend on the Turkish Straits include Ukraine and Kazakhstan. While much of the Black Sea grain is destined for buyers in the Mediterranean region, including Syria, Egypt, and Algeria, some also travels on through the Suez Canal for export to Asia and Africa. In total, 9 per cent of the world trade in grain moves through Suez.[17]

Figure 1. Food Chokepoints: Approximate share of global exports, 2015. Source: Bailey & Wellesley 2017, p. 11.



Several Middle Eastern and African nations depend almost completely on imported grain and other food, which makes them vulnerable to disruptions in eastern Mediterranean trade. For example, Djibouti, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia rely on the Suez Canal for between 85% and 100% of their wheat imports.[18] The world's largest wheat importer, Egypt, mainly buys from Russia and, to a lesser

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[16] *Economist* 2018.
[17] Bailey & Wellesley 2017, p. 14.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 57–8. Data from 2015.

extent, from Ukraine and Romania, via the Turkish Straits.[19] Even distant South Korea imports about a third of its maize and wheat via Suez.[20]

In addition to grain, the eastern Mediterranean is also critical to other trade flows essential to agriculture and food production. For example, a third of the world's most commonly traded fertiliser, potassium chloride, is shipped through the Suez Canal, mainly in the form of southbound export from Canada, Russia, and Belarus to China.[21]

Late March 2021 offered an illustration of the risks posed by trade disruption, when the *Ever Given*, a Taiwan-flagged 220,000-tonne container ship, accidentally wedged itself across the Suez Canal. Freeing the *Ever Given* took nearly a week, and, as the crisis went on, some $10 billion of trade was held up each day and more than 420 vessels queued up on both ends of the canal while others had to be re-routed around Africa.[22]

2.2 Energy

The eastern Mediterranean is an important arena for the global energy trade. The Suez Canal, in particular, allows Persian Gulf oil and gas to reach markets in Europe. While less crucial to global trade, the Turkish Straits are important for the export of Russian oil, some of which also continues south through the Suez Canal toward India and other Asian customers.

In the late '00s, a US government study determined that the eastern Mediterranean held significant underwater gas resources. Since then, discoveries have been made in the waters of Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus. There is ongoing exploration elsewhere, notably by Turkey, whose controversial, politically-inspired surveying of waters disputed with Greece and Cyprus has led to an escalation of regional tensions in recent years (see 2.3.1).

The SUMED Pipeline

The Suez-Mediterranean Pipeline (SUMED) connects the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, close to Alexandria. It can carry up to 2.8 million barrels of oil per day. Conceived as an alternative route for Gulf oil during the 1967-75 closure of the Suez Canal, due to Egyptian-Israeli hostilities, it began operations in 1977. SUMED is co-owned by Egypt (50%), the United Arab Emirates (15%), Qatar (15%), Saudi Arabia (15%), and Kuwait (5%).

Current estimates hold that the region may contain some 286 trillion m^3 of natural gas, in addition to the 88 billion already discovered in the past decade. By global standards, these are significant but hardly enormous figures. Even in the event that the full estimated amount could be confirmed, the region would

[19] *Egypt Independent* 2020.
[20] Bailey & Wellesley 2017, p. 53-4.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[22] Sheppard *et al.* 2021a; Sheppard *et al.* 2021b.

still only contain some 4 per cent of the world's total known gas deposits. By way of comparison, Russia controls known gas deposits totalling 1320 trillion m^3, Iran holds another 1133 trillion m^3 and Qatar 871 trillion m^3. Moreover, eastern Mediterranean gas tends to be found in deep waters, making it especially difficult and costly to extract; and, with the exception of Egypt, the region lacks a well-developed export infrastructure.[23]

The gas resources are nonetheless important to countries in the region. They are also of interest to the EU, which seeks to diversify its gas import to reduce dependence on Russia. Ironically, while profitable export will require regional collaboration, the issue is also contributing to the region's militarisation by activating several previously dormant maritime boundary disputes.

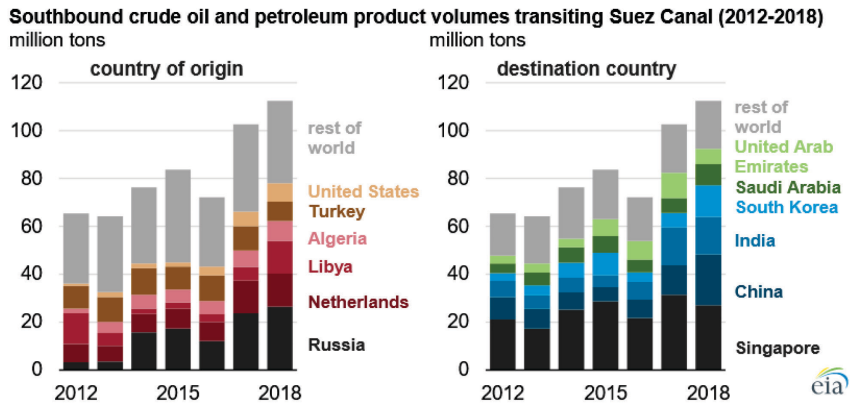
2.2.1 Energy Trade

About 9 per cent of the global seaborne trade in petroleum products passes through the eastern Mediterranean's southern outlet, either via the Suez Canal or through the Suez-Mediterranean Pipeline, or SUMED, which transfers oil from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. This trade is largely made up of oil imports from the Persian Gulf region to Europe, the wider Mediterranean region, and North America. Southbound shipments include Russian, Libyan, Algerian, and US oil headed for India, China, Singapore, and South Korea.[24]

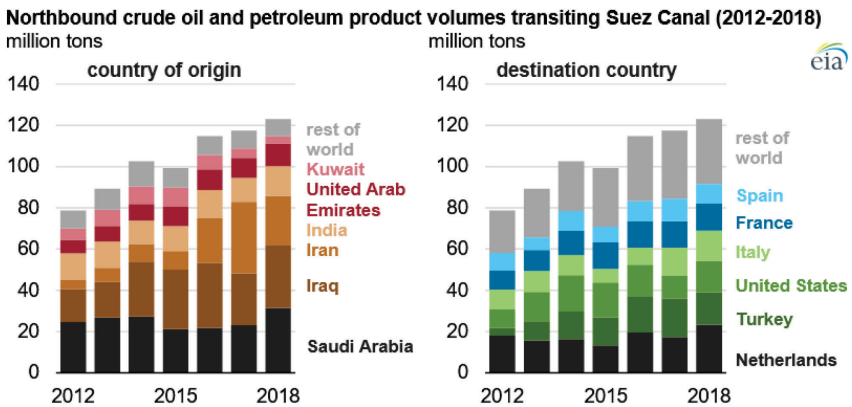
In addition to oil products, the Suez Canal also handles some 8 per cent of the world trade in liquefied natural gas (LNG), most of which is shipped from Qatar to Turkey or EU nations.[25] The European Union imports approximately 50 per cent of its oil and 35 per cent of its LNG via the eastern Mediterranean.[26]

[23] Sukkarieh 2021.
[24] EIA 2019.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Stergiou 2019, p. 12.

Figures 2 and 3. Northbound Suez Canal Oil and Petroleum Transit. Source: EIA 2019.



Figures 4 and 5. Northbound Suez Canal Oil and Petroleum Transit. Source: EIA 2019.



2.2.2 Gas Resources, the EMGF, and East Med

In the early 2010s, significant natural gas deposits were discovered off the coasts of Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus. The most important fields, Zohr and Leviathan, were located, respectively, in Egyptian and Israeli waters.[27] Both fields are now operational.

The eastern Mediterranean gas sector has drawn considerable international interest, with contracts awarded to major companies, including Eni (Italy), Total (France), BP (United Kingdom), Noble and ExxonMobil (USA), and Rosneft and

[27] Stergiou 2019, p. 13.

Novatek (Russia).[28] The European Union takes an interest in the development of the region's resources, not merely because Cyprus is an EU member, but also as a part of its strategy to increase energy security and reduce dependence on Russian gas.[29]

Hopes that collaborative energy production would promote good neighbourly relations have thus far not been realised. Instead, the gas discoveries of the 2010s have raised the stakes in pre-existing local disputes and contributed to a region-wide naval build-up, engendering new patterns of polarisation and bloc formation, rather than area-wide cooperation.[30]

In particular, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt seek to curtail Turkey's influence and prevent Ankara from controlling the future eastern Mediterranean energy infrastructure. Turkey is working toward the exact opposite end, to break out of isolation and seize what it perceives to be its rightful share of influence.

Between 2018 and 2020, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt worked together with Jordan, Palestine, and Italy to create the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), a Cairo-based multilateral organisation.[31] The creation of the EMGF was encouraged by the European Union and the United States, but it had an unmistakable anti-Turkish tint. In March 2021, France was admitted as the EMGF's eighth member, while the United States was granted observer status.[32]

The EMGF nations have so far pursued two different approaches. On the one hand, they rely on Egypt, which is using its already-existing LNG export infrastructure to position itself as a regional hub for onward export. Separately, the EMGF supports plans for a new undersea pipeline, known as East Med, that would link Israel with Europe via Cyprus, Greece, and Italy.

EMGF members have also been separately active in wielding gas sales as an economic and diplomatic tool, including through a four-country deal, in September 2021, to supply Egyptian gas to Lebanon.

The Egyptian LNG Infrastructure

Egypt is the only country in the eastern Mediterranean region to operate LNG processing plants and export terminals. These have the added advantage of already being connected to a grid of pipelines that stretches across the Sinai Peninsula toward Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Two liquefaction plants, in Idku and

[28] Bowlus 2020.
[29] Stergiou 2019, p. 12.
[30] Rubin & Eiran 2019, s. 990–3.
[31] Palestinian representatives boycotted the EMGF inauguration in September 2020, reportedly in response to Israel's demand that they would be representing the "Palestinian Authority," rather than the "State of Palestine." However, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry insisted that Palestine remained a member of the EMGF. WAFA 2020.
[32] EMGF 2021

Damietta, both went online in 2005 but faced dwindling domestic supplies and, despite the discovery in 2015 of the large Zohr field, in 2019 Egypt used less than 30 per cent of its liquefaction capacity.[33] With the discovery of gas fields in neighbouring Israel and Cyprus, this unused capacity turned into an asset, since, until other solutions emerge, Egyptian LNG export represents the only feasible option for gas sales to Europe.[34]

In 2019, Egypt signed import deals with Israel and Cyprus, aiming to repackage, as LNG, gas imported cheaply via pipeline and ship it to Europe, at a premium. Israeli gas would arrive via the Sinai Peninsula, while a new undersea pipeline would link the Aphrodite field, south of Cyprus, with Egypt.[35] The Sinai gas infrastructure is, however, regularly sabotaged, including by a local Islamic State franchise; pipeline explosions occurred in both December 2020 and January 2021.[36] In February 2021, Israel and Egypt inked a deal for the construction of another new undersea pipeline that will link the Israeli Leviathan field directly to Egypt.[37]

The East Med Pipeline

Separately from the Egyptian export projects, the EMGF also supports a planned pipeline project, dubbed East Med, which seeks to link Leviathan to consumers in the EU via Cyprus, Greece, and Italy.

Using a pipeline would normally be cheaper than the Egyptian LNG route, but East Med faces daunting technical and political obstacles. For some of its intended route, the 1900-km-long pipeline would run as deep as 3.3 km below the sea's surface, across an earthquake-prone seabed. Even if completed, East Med would play a limited role in the EU energy strategy, only covering approximately 4 per cent of overall demand.[38] The union nevertheless supports the construction of East Med as one piece of a larger puzzle, which also involves pipeline import via Turkey (in turn imported from Azerbaijan, Russia, or other sources) and LNG from Egypt. Brussels has therefore designated East Med a "project of common interest," a status that offers improved access to European financing and expedited bureaucratic treatment.[39]

After years of discussions and preparations, the energy ministers of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel met in Athens to launch the project in January 2020, and aimed to reach a final investment decision in 2022 and complete construction by 2025. Turkey criticised the agreement, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hami Aksoy insisting that the "most economical and secure route to utilize the natural resources

[33] International Gas Union 2020, pp. 33, 99.
[34] *Reuters* 2020a.
[35] Hassan 2020.
[36] *Al-Araby al-Jadid* 2021.
[37] *Reuters* 2021a.
[38] Stergiou 2019, pp. 18–19.
[39] European Commission n.d.

in the eastern Mediterranean and deliver them to consumption markets in Europe, including our country, is Turkey."[40]

Israel had previously shown interest in an Israel-Turkey pipeline, which, on the one hand, would have been less technically complex but, on the other, faced political problems, in the form of Lebanese and Cypriot boundary disputes. However, Turkey's anti-Israel turn under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has undermined the idea.

The Arab Gas Deal

On 8 September 2021, in Amman, the energy ministers of EMGF members Egypt and Jordan joined with their counterparts from Lebanon and Syria to sign a joint energy agreement. The deal provides for Egyptian gas export to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria, using existing pipelines.[41]

The deal offered its participants both economic and political advantages: it promised to ameliorate Lebanon's then extreme energy crisis, following a collapse in the country's currency and banking system; provided Egypt with a stable export outlet, without taxing its LNG trade; offered much-needed income to Jordan; and gave Syria not only gas, but an opening for normalising relations with its Arab neighbours after years of war and isolation.

The United States facilitated the deal in the interest of stabilising Lebanon and the wider region, including by securing World Bank funding and ensuring that the project would be exempt from US financial sanctions on Syria.[42] Egypt has reportedly assured Syria and Lebanon, both of which are formally at war with Israel, that no gas pumped from Israel's Leviathan field would be sent north.[43]

[40] Koutantou 2020.
[41] Petra 2021.
[42] Heller 2021.
[43] Rose 2021.

2.3 Conflicts and Rivalries

The eastern Mediterranean region suffers from numerous unresolved political problems, including civil wars and insurgencies, intra-state conflicts, and pervasive disputes over land and sea boundaries. It is possible to discern three main clusters of conflict:

- the Turkish-Greek rivalry, including the Cyprus question;
- the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestine question;
- the fallout from the 2011 Arab Spring, including wars in Libya and Syria.

The following section surveys each of these three clusters. Some issues are raised in more detail, or from a different perspective, in Section 2.4, which deals with the major regional actors.

2.3.1 Issues Related to the Turkish-Greek Rivalry

Tensions between Turkey and Greece date back to the Ottoman era; they merge irreconcilable historical narratives and deeply felt issues of national identity with political disagreements, especially over maritime boundaries. Although both countries have been treaty allies through NATO since the 1950s, outside parties have repeatedly had to intervene to prevent conflict, with heated crises in 1976, 1987, 1995–96, and 2020.[44] Ankara and Athens are also on opposite sides of the conflict in Cyprus, and have quarrelled bitterly over migration issues. But although never problem-free, there have been spells of optimism and relations have often been quite functional.

The 2010s have seen a gradual deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations, linked, in particular, to a change in Turkey's foreign-policy posture.

In the 2010s, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began to promote a more ambitious and unilateral foreign policy, with anti-Western overtones (see 2.4.1). Erdoğan's turn to nationalism appeared to be motivated by a mixture of domestic, ideological, and national security concerns, including new risks and opportunities created by the 2011 Arab Spring (see 2.3.2). Turkey's confrontative approach has been particularly pronounced after a failed 2016 coup attempt, which allowed Erdoğan to consolidate power and purge opponents.[45] Since 2016, Turkey has intervened militarily in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and the South Caucasus, while also reviving maximalist claims in the Mediterranean.

[44] ICG 2021, pp. 3–6.
[45] Koru 2021.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was adopted in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1982. A supplementary agreement was concluded in 1994. Among other things, UNCLOS includes:

• The right to a territorial sea, extending no more than 12 nautical miles (M) from land, which foreign ships may only pass for peaceful purposes and with certain restrictions. For example, submarines may not travel submerged. The territorial sea also delimits national air space.

• The right to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of up to 200 M that controls marine life and seabed assets, including oil and gas.

• Overlapping claims are equitably divided along the middle unless the parties agree to other arrangements. States may voluntarily reduce their claims along all or part of their coastline.

• Islands are treated as any other land area.

As of 2021, UNCLOS has been ratified by 150 states. Of the states mentioned in this report, Russia, Lebanon, Palestine, and all EU members are parties to UNCLOS and the 1994 agreement. The USA, Turkey, Israel, Libya, Syria, and the UAE have not ratified UNCLOS. Egypt has ratified UNCLOS but not the 1994 agreement.

Turkey and Greece have conflicting claims to ownership of a number of small, uninhabited islets close to the Turkish coast. They also disagree on the extent of Greek air space and about whether certain islands should, per past agreements, be demilitarised or not.[46] Additionally, they disagree about which international systems should govern the distribution of maritime territory. Like most countries in the world, Greece has signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but Turkey belongs to a minority of countries that refuse to sign or ratify UNCLOS.

Specifically, Turkey insists that territorial waters in the Aegean Sea must remain at 6 nautical miles (M), instead of the 12 M allowed under UNCLOS. If Greece were to unilaterally declare a 12 M boundary, its territorial waters would engulf most of the Aegean and prevent ships from entering and exiting the Black Sea without passing Greek territory (see 2.4.2). Since the mid-1990s, Turkey has repeatedly stated that such an expansion would be cause for war.[47]

Turkey also opposes the UNCLOS system for attributing *exclusive economic zones* (EEZ), preferring to instead advance its own maritime economic claims using the related concept of *continental shelves*. If UNCLOS were to be applied to the letter in the eastern Mediterranean, it would award Greece vast areas of the Levantine Sea based solely on the location of Kastellorizo, a small Greek island (over which Turkey does not claim sovereignty) that sits just off the Turkish coast. Turkey is far from alone in viewing such a distribution as unrealistic and unfair, but it has

[46] Perrigueur 2021.
[47] *Hürriyet Daily News* 2020.

undercut its case by promoting an even more maximalist counterclaim that disregards claims emanating from islands, including Crete and Cyprus. Under such a system, much of the eastern Mediterranean would accrue to Turkey.

The gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean have reactivated this conflict. While Athens and Nicosia engaged in energy diplomacy to ensure Turkey's exclusion, Erdoğan has sought to derail any regional project in which his government is not allowed to play a leading part. In particular, Turkey sent research vessels and drillships escorted by warships into waters near Cyprus and Crete in 2019 and 2020, causing serious damage to the Turkish-EU relationship.

To balance against Turkey, Greece and Cyprus have tried to draw on EU support, while also building new alliances outside Europe. Since 2014, both countries have met annually in trilateral summits with Egypt. In 2016, they launched a similar process with Israel. The trilateral talks are not highly structured, but have helped engender some military, commercial, and cultural cooperation. They also helped pave the way for the creation of the EMGF (see 2.2.2).

Most importantly, the trilateral diplomacy has facilitated the emergence of a loose anti-Turkey bloc of states, involving both EU members (mainly Greece, Cyprus, and France) and Ankara's Middle Eastern rivals (e.g., Israel, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates).

The Cyprus Conflict

Turkey and Greece are key actors in the long-dormant but unresolved conflict over Cyprus, which remains divided into Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot parts.

Communal tensions between the island's Greek-speaking majority and its Turkish-speaking minority predated the 1960 independence of the Republic of Cyprus from the United Kingdom and eventually blossomed into civil war.

Since 1974, the island has been divided into a southern, Greek-speaking section, which retains international recognition as the Republic of Cyprus, and a northern, Turkish-speaking section that comprises about 37 per cent of the island's territory. The latter area is occupied by Turkish troops and governed by the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is only recognised by Turkey. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which was originally established in 1964, monitors a buffer zone known as the Green Line. As of 2021, some 33,000 Turkish troops remain stationed in TRNC areas and around 1000 Greek soldiers are based in Republic of Cyprus-controlled areas. The United Kingdom also retains two bases on the island, staffed by some 2,260 troops and used, among other things, to collect signals intelligence.[48]

[48] IISS 2021, pp. 93–4.

In a classic example of a "frozen conflict," the Greek-Cypriot and Turk-Cypriot leaderships have maintained a stable ceasefire for decades, while engaging in repeated rounds of UN-backed negotiations on how to reunite the island in a "bizonal, bicommunal federation." As guarantor powers, Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom are also parties to the peace process.

To date, all negotiations have failed. In 2004, the Republic of Cyprus was admitted to the European Union, which reduced pressure on the Greek-Cypriot side to compromise. Soon after, Turkish-Cypriot voters approved, but Greek-Cypriot voters rejected, what was arguably the most credible peace plan to date, a reunification proposal brokered by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. To Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot community, the rejection was perceived as a slap in the face and a sign that the Greek-Cypriot side would not agree to significant concessions. After the failure of yet another round of negotiations in 2017 in the Swiss town of Crans-Montana, where Ankara had again showed some flexibility, Turkey began to revise its attitude to the conflict.[49]

In 2020, Erdoğan supported the election of Ersin Tatar as TRNC president. He also encouraged controversial changes to the TRNC's handling of Varosha, a former Greek-Cypriot area located in North Cyprus, in clear violation of repeated UN Security Council resolutions. The two presidents subsequently began to push for a two-state solution, i.e. a formal partitioning of the island instead of the federative solution that had thus far been at the heart of the peace process.[50] Given that the TRNC is so small, dependent on Turkey, and inhabited by a large number of settlers from the Turkish mainland, some argue that a two-state partitioning of the island may not in fact be Erdoğan's final goal; instead, it could be intended as a step on the way to full Turkish annexation.[51] In April 2021, a new round of UN-led talks in Geneva fell apart quickly, when both Turkey and the TRNC doubled down on their new commitment to a two-state solution.[52]

While there has been no resumption of military hostilities, Turkey appears to have reinforced its position on the island. In late 2019, the Turkish Air Force stationed TB-2 *Bayraktar* drones at the Geçitkale Air Base on northern Cyprus. By mid-2021, the base was reportedly being upgraded to house additional drones, surveillance aircraft, and fighter jets, representing a considerable expansion of Turkey's reach across eastern Mediterranean air space and causing regional concern.[53]

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[49] Drousiotis 2020.
[50] Hadjicostis 2020b.
[51] According to a 2007 study, 27.5 per cent of the population of North Cyprus were citizens of Turkey rather than of the TRNC. In addition, 15 per cent of TRNC citizens were born in Turkey and 30 per cent had at least one parent born in Turkey. Hatay 2007, pp. 30–1.
[52] Van der Made 2021.
[53] Hadjicostis *et al.* 2021.

Tensions over Gas Exploration

The frozen conflict on Cyprus creates another set of sea boundary disputes, as Turkey, alone, concludes agreements with TRNC authorities, while refusing to admit the legitimacy of international agreements with the Republic of Cyprus.[54] In 2018, for example, a research rig belonging to the Italian oil company, Eni, which had acquired Cypriot gas exploration licenses, was blocked and forced out of the area by Turkish warships, on the argument that the TRNC had allocated the same area to the Turkish state oil company, TPAO.[55]

In 2019, Turkish research ships accompanied by naval escorts repeatedly moved into waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus. That winter, Turkey and its Libyan client, the UN-endorsed government in Tripoli, concluded a maritime delimitation agreement designed to challenge the UNCLOS-based Greek and EU view of the region's maritime boundaries.[56] The deal set off a storm of protests. Turkey then upped the ante by sending drillships into waters near Crete in 2020, radically escalating the situation and prompting fears of naval clashes.[57]

Greece ultimately went the diplomatic route, seeking regional and EU support. Joint European action is complicated, however, by the fact that several EU members want to avoid escalated conflict with Turkey, whether to protect economic relationships or out of fear that Turkey may lift border security measures to unleash another migrant crisis (see 2.4.2). Governments such as Spain, Hungary, and Germany have advocated a cautious line, while Greece, Cyprus, and France are Erdoğan's harshest critics. Greece and Cyprus also received symbolic support from Turkey's regional rivals, including Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

Nevertheless, Brussels was clear in its condemnation of Turkey's actions and responded to what it views as violations of Cypriot and Greek sovereignty by blacklisting two TPAO executives in 2020 and threatening further sanctions.[58] After considerable tension and EU threats to issue more sanctions, Turkey ceased its forays into disputed waters, allowing for a calmer 2021. However, the conflict was never resolved and may be revived at any moment.

Like the EU, the United States has been sharply critical of Turkey's actions.[59] For its part, Russia has called for de-escalation in general terms and offered to mediate.[60]

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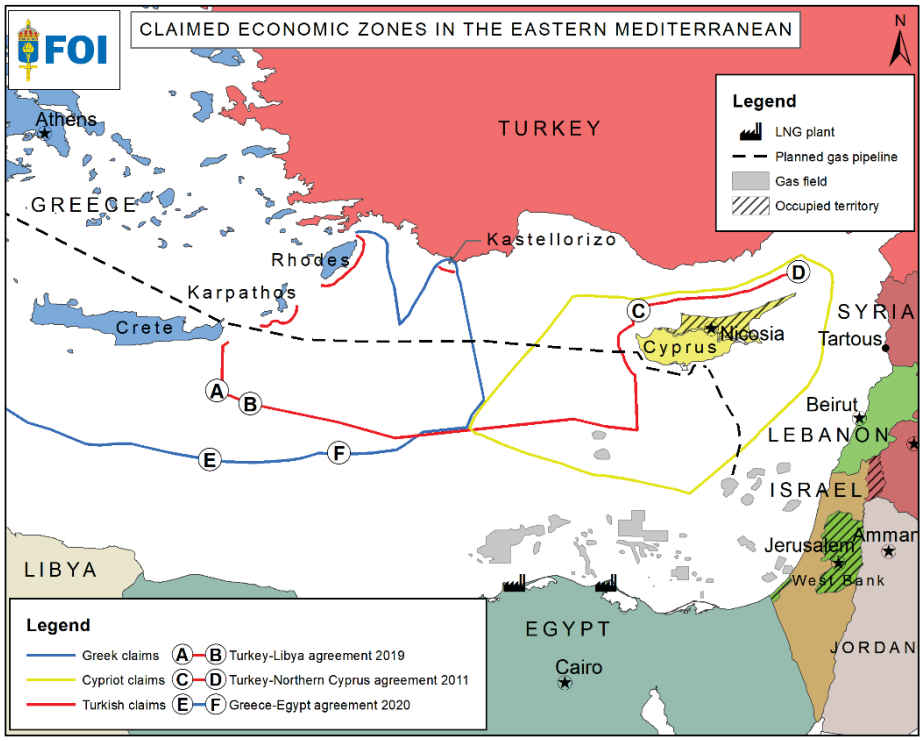
[54] Eissler & Arasıl 2014, p. 77.
[55] AFP 2018.
[56] Butler & Gümrükçü 2019.
[57] ICG 2021; Lund 2020.
[58] Council of the EU (2020); Brzozowski 2020.
[59] *Reuters* 2020b.
[60] Hadjicostis 2020a.



Map 2. Claimed Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean

2.3.2 Issues Related to the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Since Israel's creation in 1948, the Jewish state has been locked in a state of war with most of the Arab World. Active wars were fought in 1956 (the Suez War), 1967 (the June or Six-Day War), 1973 (the October, 10 Ramadan, or Yom Kippur War), 1982–2000 (Israel's occupation of South Lebanon), and 2006 (the Israel-Lebanon War). Since 1967, Israel has also occupied the remainder of historic Palestine (an area that includes East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip) as well as Syria's Golan Heights.

The Arab-Israeli conflict cluster has led to the creation of several UN peace-keeping missions, three of which remain active today:

- the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), the first-ever UN peacekeeping mission, created in 1948, which monitors cease-fires and peace agreements between Israel and its neighbours;
- the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), performing a variety of tasks to prevent Israel-Lebanon hostilities since 1978;

- the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which since 1974 has separated Israeli and Syrian forces in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights region.

Although the first decades of the conflict were dominated by conventional state-on-state warfare and the risk thereof, the Arab world's united front against Israel has fragmented over time. In 1979, US-brokered talks helped Israel strike a separate peace deal with Egypt, the most powerful Arab state. In 1993, Israel concluded the Oslo Agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which was followed by a peace deal with Jordan in 1994. Relations with US-friendly Arab governments then gradually but quietly improved. In 2020, the United States brokered a series of deals in which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco agreed to formally recognise Israel and end the state of war, in return for various US inducements. Israel nevertheless remains in a formal state of war with most Arab countries, including two of its neighbours: Lebanon and Syria.

Israel occupied southern Lebanon from 1982 until 2000, when it retreated in the face of stubborn resistance by the Iran- and Syria-backed Hezbollah guerrilla. The summer of 2006 saw a short but destructive Israel-Hezbollah war. Since then, the border has remained tense but mostly calm. Gas discoveries in the Mediterranean Sea have stimulated a mutual interest in settling the Israeli-Lebanese maritime boundary, and the United States has facilitated several rounds of delimitation talks since 2010 (see 2.4.3). Renewed conflict remains a distinct possibility, however. Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon has increased in recent years, as the country has grown more dysfunctional following an economic collapse in 2019–20.

Israel's ceasefire line with Syria in the occupied Golan Heights region has historically been calm, but during the Syrian Civil War it has been the scene of low-level violence. Since 2013, the Israeli Air Force has also regularly struck Hezbollah- and Iran-linked targets inside Syria. The Israeli government has negotiated a de-confliction system with Russia, after the latter's 2015 intervention in Syria. In recent years, Israel has also routinely targeted ships bringing Iranian oil and arms to Syria (see 3.3.2).

The Israel-PLO peace process is long since defunct, which has left Israel in indefinite possession of territories inhabited by millions of stateless Palestinians. East Jerusalem is governed as a part of Israeli territory, since the Israeli government considers it, and the Golan Heights, to be legally annexed. Some parts of the West Bank are internally governed by the PLO through a system of self-ruling enclaves known as the Palestinian Authority. Gaza has been controlled by Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood-linked militant group, since 2006. Israel maintains a tight economic blockade on Gaza and open conflict erupted in 2008–9, 2012, 2014, and 2021. Although the Palestinian issue has become less central to Arab and Muslim politics since the Arab Spring events in 2011, pro-Palestinian sentiment remains strong

and most regional governments continue to tread gingerly in their relations with Israel for fear of domestic blowback.

Turkey-Israel relations were strong during the 1990s, but the relationship gradually deteriorated following the arrival of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamist AKP party to power in 2002. In 2010, a Turkish-backed civilian aid flotilla challenged Israel's naval blockade on Gaza but was met with armed force, killing Turkish citizens and collapsing Turkish-Israeli ties. Ambassador-level relations have since been severed, except for a brief period in 2016–18.[61] Since the mid-2010s, Israel has instead moved closer to Turkey's regional rivals Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.[62] In 2020 Turkey began reaching out to Israel, as well as to Egypt and the UAE, in the hope of reducing the level of tension, but no breakthrough had been achieved by early 2022.[63]

2.3.3 Issues Related to the 2011 Arab Spring

Starting in December 2010 and culminating in early 2011, a series of popular uprisings dubbed "the Arab Spring" swept through the Middle East. Three eastern Mediterranean nations were fundamentally transformed by the Arab Spring.

Egypt's long-ruling president, Hosni Mubarak, was forced from power in February 2011. After a brief and messy democratic interlude, defence minister Abdelfattah al-Sisi seized power in 2013.

Libya's dictator, Moammar al-Gaddafi, was killed in a NATO-backed rebellion in October 2011, leaving the country without any effective government. Today, the western part of Libya is propped up by Turkish troops, while rival authorities in the east are backed by Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and like-minded nations.

The Libyan Civil War

In early 2011, Libya began to fragment as long-ruling dictator Moammar al-Gaddafi faced an uprising. In March 2011, the UN Security Council authorised member states to protect civilians in Libya, which facilitated a NATO-led aerial campaign in support of the rebels. Gaddafi was killed in October 2011. In the absence of a central government, Libya broke apart and has remained unstable. Large-scale fighting resumed in 2014. By 2019, Turkey, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates were directly involved in the conflict. A 2020 agreement curtailed fighting but has failed to resolve disagreements.

[61] Ulusoy 2020; Landau & Lis 2018.
[62] Ağdemir 2015.
[63] Lis 2022.

Syria was thrust into a devastating, sectarian-tinged civil war. Ten years later, President Bashar al-Assad's Russian-backed government remains in power, but the country is in a shambles and Damascus has lost large peripheral areas to rival groups backed by Turkey and the United States.

The Syrian Civil War

In 2011, an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian rule deteriorated into a devastating civil war, with sectarian dimensions and extensive international involvement. The rise of extremist groups prompted a US-led intervention in Islamic State-held parts of Syria in 2014. Assad's government has gradually recovered most of Syria, after a Russian aerial intervention in 2015, but cannot enter areas controlled by the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces or Turkish-backed Sunni Arab rebels; these groups also oppose each other. Since 2018, the conflict has largely stabilised along semi-frozen front lines, but Syria remains divided, unstable, and violent, with an economy pulverised by war and sanctions. There is little hope of a comprehensive peace deal. Since 2011, some six million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries or to Europe.

These and other developments fed into a multisided regional cold war involving three main camps:

- the Turkey-Qatar camp, which espouses Sunni Islamist-friendly, pro-revolutionary policies. Egypt briefly belonged to this camp in 2012, when it was ruled by President Mohammed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood;
- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and their allies, grouped in a *status quo*-oriented block that has generally promoted non-Islamist authoritarians and pushed back against Turkish-Qatari and Iranian influence. Egypt joined this camp in 2013, when Morsi was overthrown by Sisi's Saudi- and Emirati-backed coup;
- Iran and its state or nonstate allies in Syria (the Assad government), Iraq (Shia parties/militias), Palestine (Hamas), Yemen (the Houthis), and Lebanon (Hezbollah). Together, they form a self-styled "axis of resistance" defined by its opposition to US, Israeli, and Saudi influence.[64]

By mid-2021, tensions between the first two blocs had subsided somewhat, but the region remains divided and overburdened by numerous political and military proxy conflicts.

[64] On these blocs and the post-2011 regional feuds, see e.g. Lynch 2016 and Phillips 2016.

2.4 The Eastern Mediterranean Big Four

Among the states of the eastern Mediterranean, even a casual survey of basic demographic, economic, and military indicators (see Figure 6) reveals that four nations stand out, especially in terms of naval capabilities.

Figure 6. The nine eastern Mediterranean nations

Key figures	GRE	TUR	ISR	EGY	CYP	SYR	LEB	PAL	LIB
Population (m 2021)	10.5	82.5	8.8	106.5	1.3	20.4	5.3	4.9	7
GDP (bn $ 2019)	210	760	395	324	25	25 *	53	10	52
GDP/PPP (bn $ 2019)	319	2317	366	1181	36	56 *	100	30	103
Defence budget (bn $ 2019)	4.8	12.1	16.8	3.3	0.4	?	1.93	?	?
Defence/GDP (2019)	2.36%	1.85%	5%	1.2%	1.6%	?	4.2%	?	?
Military, active (2020)	142 700	355 200	169 500	438 500	15 000	?	60 000	–	–
Military, reserve (2020)	221 350	378 700	465 000	479 000	50 000	?	–	–	–
Paramilitary (2020)	4 000	156 800	8 000	397 000	750	?	20 000?	?	?
Selected naval ship inventory									
Frigates (2020)	13	16	–	8	–	–	–	–	–
Corvettes (2020)	–	10	3 †	5	–	1?	–	–	–
Submarines (2020)	11	12	5	7	–	–	–	–	–
LHD ships (2020) ‡	–	– ◊	–	2	–	–	–	–	–

Sources: IISS Military Balance 2021 (military and defence budget data), CIA World Factbook 2021 (demographic/economic data). Notes: (*) 2014 estimates. (†) To be expanded by four new Sa'ar 6 corvettes in 2021-22. (‡) LHD ("landing helicopter, dock") refers to large amphibious assault ships/helicopter carriers. (◊) Turkey aims to commission the TCG *Anadolu* in 2022.

While Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Libya tend to serve as arenas for the conflicts of others, Turkey, Greece, Israel, and Egypt are, in various ways and to varying degrees, regional actors in their own right. They are not great powers by international standards, but in the region that they inhabit, each one of these "Big Four" nations is able to wield some degree of political and economic influence, conduct an independent foreign policy, and command significant armed forces, including a capable navy.

Syria may seem a partial exception to this rule, given that it has the region's third-largest population (larger, in fact, than Greece and Israel combined) and some

estimates place its armed forces at close to 270,000 regular troops and militiamen.[65] In practice, however, Syria is mired in civil war and has lost control over significant territory, its economy is in tatters, its army has been partially replaced by militias, and its naval capabilities are insignificant. It is in no shape to project political or military power in the region, and is unlikely to recover within the coming decade.

It follows that this quartet of nations, and their interests, must be at the centre of any external power's strategy as it attempts to build influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Russia is no exception to that rule. Moscow is in fact far more dependent on the effective navigation of regional affairs than the United States, which can rely on a vast network of long-term partners and allies throughout the region. Of the eastern Mediterranean's four major nations, Turkey and Greece are NATO members, while Israel and Egypt have been designated major non-NATO allies of the United States.

The following section offers a brief sketch of each of the eastern Mediterranean Big Four states, with a particular emphasis on the maritime dimension and on their ties to Russia.

[65] Lund 2018, pp. 54-5; IISS 2021, pp. 366-8.

2.4.1 Turkey

Powerful, ambitious, blessed by geography, and with a knack for finding new enemies, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey sits at the heart of many of the eastern Mediterranean region's crises.

Map 3. Turkey

With a population of some 82.5 million, Turkey is one of the region's two giants, second only to 106.5-million-strong Egypt. The Turkish economy is more advanced than Egypt's and larger than that of any other eastern Mediterranean state, although its at one point impressive economic performance has in recent years suffered a long stretch of crises. Turkey also operates the second-largest armed forces in NATO, after the United States, totalling some 355,000 personnel. Last but not least, it enjoys an eminently strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, with control over the sole passageway between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Turkey has served both as the gate to the Black Sea and as the spine of NATO's southern flank since joining the alliance in 1952, but its attention to the Soviet Union and later Russia was always diluted by other concerns. Internally, the Turkish military has been preoccupied with domestic politics and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) rebellion. Externally, it has been embroiled in toxic disputes with Greece and Cyprus.

Under Erdoğan and his Islamist-nationalist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has led the country for two decades, Turkey has begun to shift its strategic orientation toward a more independent-minded, hard-power focused, and anti-Western posture, with overt aspirations to regional leadership. As part of this process, official and AKP rhetoric has increasingly adopted nationalist tropes that portray Turkey as being under threat from a vast conspiracy of foreign enemies and domestic traitors. This turn toward a paranoid, militaristic style of nationalism has been particularly pronounced after a failed 2016 coup, which was followed by large-scale purges and a radicalisation of official rhetoric.[66]

In the last few years, Erdoğan has worked hard to boost Turkey's influence in Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean region. He has sent troops and proxies to intervene in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and, most recently, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno Karabakh; and he has used Turkey's powerful navy to press Turkish claims in the Mediterranean. Since 2016, Erdoğan has also led Turkey into a complicated transactional relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin, initially by cooperating across the conflict line in Syria, where Turkey opposed US collaboration with PKK-linked Kurdish forces.[67]

These moves, along with Erdoğan's fiery anti-Western rhetoric, have incurred considerable political costs. Turkey's ties to the United States, NATO, and the EU have grown very strained. Regional rivals have reacted to Erdoğan's ambitions by banding together to balance Turkey, pushing back through proxy warfare in Syria or Libya as well as in the maritime and energy domains.

[66] Koru 2018; Koru 2021.
[67] Lund 2019a, pp. 24-5, 33-4; Hammargren 2019.

Turkish Maritime and Naval Issues

Historically a land power, Turkey nevertheless operates the eastern Mediterranean region's largest navy, owing to conflicts with Greece and Cyprus and to the fact that Russia sits on the opposite shore of the Black Sea.

Map 4. The Turkish Straits

During the Cold War, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was larger than the Turkish Navy, but the collapse of the Soviet Union reversed these roles; Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 again tipped the balance. Even now, Turkey maintains a clear numerical edge over the Russian Black Sea Fleet, but new Russian on-shore capabilities (sensors, anti-air and anti-ship missiles, aircraft, etc.) likely offset Turkey's naval power.[68]

In addition, the Turkish Navy divides its resources between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, where it is preoccupied by tensions with Greece in the Aegean Sea, around Cyprus, and over maritime claims in the Levantine Sea. Only four of the Turkish Navy's fourteen bases face the Black Sea coast, while another three are located in the Sea of Marmara and seven on the Mediterranean coast.[69] However,

[68] Wezeman & Kuimova 2018, p. 11; Petersen 2019.
[69] Wezeman & Kuimova 2018, p. 9.

the navy can flexibly shift resources back and forth across the Turkish Straits, re-assigning ships as needed to either the Northern Sea Area Command, which covers the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits, or to the Southern Sea Area Command, which covers the Mediterranean Sea.[70]

Under Erdoğan, the Turkish Navy has benefited from significant increases in military spending, which rose by 48 per cent in real terms in the 2007–17 period.[71] Recent acquisitions include submarines, landing ships, logistics vessels, and frigates. Turkey has also made great strides over the past decade in the creation of a domestic naval industry, often by using evolved German designs and promoting export to friendly nations such as Pakistan and Qatar. Of special note is the MİLGEM programme, which has seen the fully-domestic construction of corvettes and frigates, with the I-class frigate, *Istanbul*, launched in January 2021. Plans are also underway for Turkey's first domestically produced guided-missile destroyer. Although Turkey is currently in the process of acquiring locally assembled variants of the German-designed Type-214 diesel-electric attack submarines, a parallel programme to develop a national submarine is under discussion.[72]

The navy's forthcoming flagship is the *Anadolu*, an amphibious assault ship modelled on Spain's *Juan Carlos I* and originally planned for commissioning in late 2021. (A second such ship, the *Trakya*, is also planned.) Originally intended to load fifth-generation F-35 fighters, the government portrayed the *Anadolu* as an aircraft carrier capable of projecting power into the Indian and Atlantic oceans.[73] These grand plans have, however, been undermined by Erdoğan's decision to buy Russian S-400 air defence systems, which triggered Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 fighter programme in 2019.[74] In March 2021, Ankara announced that the nearly-completed *Anadolu* will instead be refitted to serve as a platform for helicopters and unmanned aircraft.[75]

Erdoğan has also insisted that Turkey will produce a full-scale aircraft carrier.[76] In November 2021, the Turkish president voiced hopes that Spain could be a partner in developing both a carrier and a new submarine.[77]

Since about 2017, the AKP government has increased its attention to maritime issues, including by playing up tensions with Greece and Cyprus (see 2.3.1 and 2.4.2) and by promoting a previously obscure ultra-nationalist doctrine known as *Mavi Vatan*, or "Blue Homeland." Its central argument is that Turkey can only realise its full potential and break free of foreign shackles by investing in maritime

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[72] Waters 2021, pp. 82–4. MİLGEM is an abbreviation of *Millî Gemi*, "National Ship."
[73] Turkish Defence Industry Presidency (n.d.).
[74] Mehta 2019.
[75] *Daily Sabah* 2021.
[76] Soylu 2021.
[77] Associated Press 2021.

power, including by building a navy capable of enforcing maximalist sea boundary claims. In 2019, Turkey launched an annual naval exercise in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, named in honour of the Blue Homeland doctrine.[78] The same year, the president posed in front of a map captioned "The Blue Homeland, 462,000 km^2" that depicted Turkey's claims on what the EU views as Greek and Cypriot economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean.[79]

For Erdoğan, encouraging Turkish nationalism, including in its maritime incarnation, has domestic benefits. Otherwise hostile opposition parties applaud Erdoğan's Blue Homeland agitation, both because they tend to agree with the message and because it is broadly popular with their own constituents.[80]

Erdoğan's Mediterranean agenda is also informed by energy politics. Turkey is a major and longstanding importer of natural gas, although a 2020 discovery in the Black Sea may reduce its domestic needs.[81] To gain political clout, secure its own energy supply, and reduce its over-dependence on Russian-controlled gas flows, Turkey is striving to establish itself as an energy hub by attracting diverse imports and creating an infrastructure for onward export to Europe. The EU supports these ambitions and views Turkey as the key node in what is termed the Southern Corridor, an attempt to diversify away from Russian supplies and connect with producers in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.[82] To this end, pipelines have been built to move gas not only from Russia to Turkey, but also from Azerbaijan to Turkey and from Turkey to the EU; Iran, Turkmenistan, and other nations could also be hooked into the Turkish pipeline grid at a later stage. In addition, Turkey buys LNG shipments transported by sea from Algeria, Qatar, Iran, Norway and other countries.[83]

Such ambitions form part of the explanation for Turkey's aggressive gunboat diplomacy in the eastern Mediterranean, where the EMGF and East Med projects are seen to threaten its energy strategy (see 2.2.2. and 2.3.1). However, Turkey's behaviour clearly also owes much to Erdoğan's personal beliefs and the increasingly strident anti-Western and nationalist tone of domestic debate.

[78] The 2020 edition was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but *Blue Homeland 2* took place in 2021. Özberk 2021.
[79] Kasapoğlu 2019; *Defence Turkey* 2019; *Kathimerini* 2019.
[80] Erdemir & Kowalski 2020.
[81] *Hürriyet Daily News* 2021.
[82] Erşen & Çelikpala 2019.
[83] Erkul Kaya 2020.

The Turkish Intervention in Libya

Turkey is deeply involved in the civil war in Libya (see 2.3.2 and 3.3.2). Alongside Qatar and much of the EU, the Turkish government has favoured west-Libyan forces in Misrata and Tripoli against the forces of Khalifa Haftar, in eastern Libya, which receive support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, and France. In November 2019, Turkey signed two memoranda with the Tripoli government: a maritime boundary delimitation deal and a military cooperation agreement.[84]

The maritime deal supported Turkey's controversial view of the Mediterranean's maritime boundaries, posing a direct challenge to Greece (by laying claims to waters near Crete) and indirectly also to Cyprus and the EU (by rejecting the basis for their territorial rights in the Mediterranean). Domestically popular, it was "heralded across Turkey's political spectrum as a triumph in the name of the country's blue homeland."[85] The agreement drew protests from the EU, however, and set the scene for Turkey-EU tension and naval sabre-rattling in 2020 (see 2.3.1).

The military cooperation agreement was seemingly adopted as a *quid pro quo* for Tripoli's cooperation on maritime boundaries. It paved the way for direct Turkish military intervention in Libya, where a surge of covert Russian assistance had recently empowered Haftar's forces to the point where they threatened Tripoli. Turkish military advisors and Turkish-controlled Syrian mercenaries began to arrive in Libya, and on 2 January the parliament in Ankara voted in favour of an official troop deployment.[86]

While battles in Libya have exclusively been fought on land, the early phase of the Turkish intervention relied heavily on maritime logistics and naval assets. In spring 2020, two *Gabya*-class guided missile frigates (modernised versions of the US *Oliver Hazard Perry* class) arrived to protect Turkish shipping and assist in the creation of a coastal air-defence umbrella, countering the air superiority that had previously been a major advantage for Haftar's forces.[87] A third frigate reportedly joined the mission later that year.[88]

Within a few months, Turkey's escalation on the Tripoli side had reset the balance of the war. On 23 October, a ceasefire agreement froze the conflict and UN-led political talks resumed. The peace talks are unlikely to resolve Libya's problems and the conflict will almost certainly relapse into violence, eventually, but events in 2019–20 enshrined Turkey and Russia as the conflict's leading external actors.

[84] Turkish Presidency 2020, pp. 33-8.
[85] Gingeras 2020.
[86] Turkish Presidency 2020, p. 38.
[87] UN S/2021/229, p. 16 (Figure 1).
[88] *Al-Arabiya* 2020.

As in Syria and in the South Caucasus, they support rival sides but engage in a constructive transactional dialogue to maximise mutual benefits.

The maritime dimension remains crucial to Turkey's operations in Libya. While Russia and its partners can supply Haftar overland via Egypt, Turkey relies on shipping to prop up its own Libyan clients. This has created friction with the EU, whose Operation Irini mission is tasked with enforcing the UN arms embargo at sea.[89] In June 2020, a Turkish *Barbaros*-class frigate escorting the M/V *Cirkin*, a Tanzanian-flagged cargo ship heading from Istanbul to Misrata, reportedly threatened a French *La Fayette*-class frigate serving in Operation Irini, by illuminating it with fire control radar systems. The French ship was forced to abort its attempts to inspect the *Cirkin*.[90] In protest of Turkey's "extremely aggressive" behaviour, Paris suspended the French Navy's participation in Operation Sea Guardian, a separate NATO-led maritime security mission.[91]

Turkish Ambitions beyond the Mediterranean

In 2015, separate agreements were signed to establish small Turkish military bases near Doha, Qatar, and in Mogadishu, Somalia; the bases were staffed and operational by 2017.[92] The Qatari and Somali governments are both close partners of Ankara. Qatar is Turkey's primary regional ally, working closely with Erdoğan's government across a range of regional conflicts. In Somalia, Turkey has invested considerable sums in the past decade, building political influence within the UN-backed government and establishing itself in strategic sectors. For example, Turkish companies now operate both the port and the airport in Mogadishu.[93]

Turkey's interest clearly also extends to other areas of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region, but it has met with concerted resistance from regional and local rivals. In December 2017, Turkey signed a 99-year lease for tourism development in Suakin, on the Sudanese Red Sea coast, while denying rumours that it intended to construct another military base.[94] In April 2019, the toppling of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir increased Emirati influence in Khartoum and produced a string of reports saying that Sudan's new leaders had thwarted Turkey's ambitions to build a base at Suakin; Ankara continued to deny ever having had any such plans.[95]

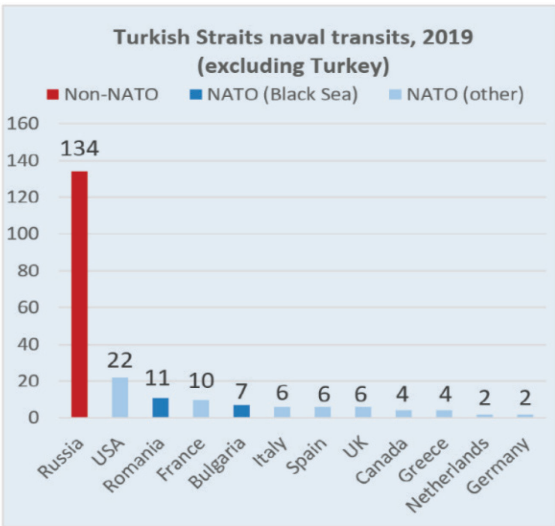
In September 2019, Lt. Gen. Abdelfattah Burhan, an Emirati-friendly Sudanese military strongman, stated that the Suakin agreement had been civilian in nature and that Sudan would never permit foreign military bases or threats to Saudi

[89] Kirechu 2021. "Irini" means "peace" in Greek.
[90] Tenré 2020; UN S/2021/229, pp. 172–3.
[91] Guibert 2020.
[92] On Qatar, see Cochrane 2016. On Somalia and Sudan, see Gasinska (ed.) 2019, pp. 39–41.
[93] Khalif 2020.
[94] *Anadolu Agency* 2018.
[95] *Daily Sabah* 2019a.

Arabia and other nations on its soil. In all likelihood, this was a reference to Turkey and Qatar.[96] Burhan and his allies ousted their civilian rivals through a coup in October 2021.

The Montreux Convention and the Istanbul Canal

Figure 7. Turkish Straits naval transits, 2019 (excluding Turkey).



Turkish Straits naval transits, 2019 (excluding Turkey)

Source: *Turkish Foreign Ministry 2019.*

Traffic through the Turkish Straits is governed by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which guarantees toll-free use of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus for merchant shipping but, at the same time, limits and regulates naval traffic to ensure that no external navy can dominate the Black Sea.[97] In practice, this has left the Turkish and Russian navies as the only big players in the Black Sea.

Turkey is in charge of implementing the convention, which it generally does to the letter. (Its own navy faces no constraints.)

As a Black Sea state, Russia is subject to far fewer limitations than, for example, the United States, but the convention does prevent the Russian Navy from swiftly shifting ships to and from the Black Sea. It also severely restricts the passage of submarines. The Russian Navy is nonetheless a frequent traveler through the Straits, increasingly so after re-establishing its permanent Mediterranean presence (2013) and intervening in Syria (2015).

In 1994, Turkey unilaterally imposed new, extraconventional regulations on ships carrying oil and hazardous materials, citing the environmental and safety risks posed by rising shipping volumes. The Turkish decision drew protests from Greece, Bulgaria, and, in particular, Russia, which accused Ankara of seeking to force its oil trade into Turkish pipeline networks.[98]

For years, Erdoğan has toyed with the idea of building a new waterway, named the Istanbul Canal, to bypass the Bosporus. Construction finally began in June 2021.

[96] Ramadan 2019.
[97] Lund 2021.
[98] Turkish Foreign Ministry (n.d.); Pavlyuk 1998.

Erdoğan's plan is controversial on environmental and economic grounds (the price tag has been estimated at $12–25 billion) but the president argues that a new canal can ease pressure on Istanbul's waterways and will provide significant toll income. He has also made incendiary claims that the new canal will be "totally outside Montreux." [99] In April 2021, Erdoğan reaffirmed this view, while insisting that Turkey shall remain committed to the convention "until it finds a better one."[100]

The Montreux Convention (1936)

- Signed on July 20, 1936, by Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Turkey, UK, USSR, and Yugoslavia.
- Defines the Turkish Straits as the Straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosporus.
- Permits free use of the Straits for merchant vessels of all nations not at war with Turkey.
- Prevents Turkey from levying fees except to cover service upkeep.
- Limits and slows the transit of non-Turkish warships, especially for non-littoral navies, which cannot remain in the Black Sea beyond 21 days and must announce their passage at least 8 and normally 15 days in advance.
- Caps the maximum tonnage of non-littoral navies in the Black Sea at a combined 45,000 tons, or 30,000 tons for a single navy and 15,000 tons for a single ship.
- Bans the introduction of non-littoral state submarines into the Black Sea; restricts littoral state submarines to non-submerged travel for repairs outside the Black Sea.

The Turkish government clearly hopes to profit from the Istanbul Canal, as Egypt does from the Suez Canal. But it has yet to explain how it would be able to reroute shipping through the new passage, given that the Montreux Convention bars Turkey from restricting or charging for traffic through the Bosporus. In addition, the Istanbul Canal cannot bypass the Montreux restrictions on naval traffic, as claimed by Erdoğan. The convention explicitly covers not just the Bosporus but also the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles, and it restricts the duration and tonnage of naval forays into the Black Sea irrespective of the route taken.[101]

It is nonetheless possible that the Istanbul Canal could serve as the basis for a Turkish demand for revisions to the convention. If so, Erdoğan may pursue the right to tax shipping while raising the convention's naval transit rules for leverage.

[99] Hincks 2020.
[100] *BIA News* 2021.
[101] Lund 2021. The inclusion of the Sea of Marmara and both straits is made explicit in the convention's preamble. The presence of external navies in the Black Sea is chiefly regulated in Article 18.

If a renegotiation of the Montreux Convention were to occur, Turkey would inevitably hold a strong hand. But given the very high stakes involved for both Russia and NATO, such a move could ignite serious international tensions.[102] Russia, which would be most directly affected by any changes to the current system, has publicly warned Erdoğan that the Montreux Convention must not be tampered with.[103]

Russian-Turkish Relations

Turkish-Russian relations have always been complicated. A centuries-long historical rivalry, structured since the 1950s by Ankara's pro-Western orientation and membership of NATO, has been diluted by pragmatic cooperation and growing trade since the end of the Cold War. Ever since Erdoğan's foreign policy revolution reached its climax in the mid-2010s, however, the relationship has taken on a new and unfamiliar form.

Building on a template of de-confliction and collaboration that emerged in 2016–17 in Syria, Turkey and Russia have entered into a new relationship that mixes elements of close cooperation with hard-knuckled competition. Even as they engage in regular proxy warfare across multiple conflicts, both Erdoğan and Putin seem determined to compartmentalise problems and make the overall relationship work to their mutual advantage. The two presidents meet and speak regularly. They appear to have developed a strong but ruthlessly transactional personal link, based on overlapping regional ambitions and a shared resentment of the Washington-centric international order.[104]

Beyond conflict diplomacy, Turkish-Russian relations have been greased by high-level agreements and exchanges, including the January 2020 inauguration of Turkstream, a natural gas pipeline across the Black Sea; Turkey's purchase of two regimental sets of the S-400 long-range air-defence system; and Russia's construction of Turkey's first nuclear plant, Akkuyu, at an estimated $20 billion.[105]

Russia's interests in Turkey are manifold. At the most basic level, it is a large and important neighbour. For Russia, Turkey is a gateway to the Middle East in both cultural, geographic, and economic terms. In 2017, Turkey represented nearly half of Russia's total trade with the Middle East and North Africa region.[106]

The two countries also share energy interests, both as partners and competitors. Russia is a major exporter of natural gas to Europe, benefitting both in the form of steady state income and political leverage. It is also a major source of gas for import-dependent Turkey, through the Blue Stream pipeline across the Black Sea,

[102] Tuygan 2020.
[103] President of Russia 2021.
[104] Koru 2018.
[105] Baev 2021, p. 9.
[106] Valdai Club 2018.

which became operational in 2003. As noted above, Turkey imports significant quantities of Russian gas but is also a key player in US- and EU-backed efforts to expand non-Russian gas sales to Europe. In this context, the new eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries are of interest and some concern to both Russia and Turkey. While their fundamental interests diverge, Russia may take quiet pleasure in seeing Turkey act as a spoiler for the EMGF and other Western-backed regional energy projects (see 2.2.2 and 2.3.1).

As important as trade and energy relations are, some experts question the extent to which they will be able to sustain a positive relationship between Russia and Turkey.[107] Strategic and security issues are central to Russia's interest in Turkey, and vice versa. As the cornerstone of NATO's southern flank, Turkey operates one of the alliance's largest armies, hosts US nuclear weapons on its territory, and controls the Bosporus and Dardanelles, which inevitably loom large in Russian strategic thinking. Russia is on record as opposing any tampering with the Montreux Convention, and has shown some concern at Erdoğan's rhetoric regarding the Istanbul Canal.[108]

In so far as Erdoğan can be coaxed away from NATO's embrace, encouraged to develop his regional influence autonomously of the United States, and made dependent on Russian favours, these things are obviously highly prioritised Russian interests. The recent rifts in Western-Turkish relations and within NATO are excellent news for Moscow.

Despite the fiery rhetoric of Erdoğan and his AKP loyalists, however, there is little reason to believe that the Turkish president would ever voluntarily quit NATO. The alliance remains a major source of leverage for Turkey over the United States and Europe, due to NATO's consensus-based decisionmaking, and it also represents Ankara's own final backstop against Russian strong-arm tactics. Worse, if Turkey were ever to step out of the alliance, its ability to threaten Greece with military action would plummet, and Ankara would no longer be able to veto NATO membership for the Republic of Cyprus. For Turkey's current crop of leaders, it makes more sense to remain awkwardly anchored in the Western camp than to act on their rhetoric and sever the connection.

NATO aside, Russia needs to engage with Turkey for a host of other security-related reasons. Conflict diplomacy has arguably grown to become the most central element in the new Russian-Turkish relationship. Despite the often rigid and sovereignty-focused rhetoric of the leaderships in Moscow and Ankara, both governments have shown themselves to be pragmatic in their on-the-ground behaviour. Both Russia and Turkey are evidently comfortable with irregular methods

[107] Baev 2021, pp. 8–10.
[108] President of Russia 2021.

and manoeuvring in semi-frozen conflicts instead of seeking formalised end states. Examples abound, from Georgia and Ukraine to Cyprus and Syria.

Using their proxy bargaining in Syria as a model, Putin and Erdoğan have since locked horns in Libya (see above and 3.3.2) and the South Caucasus, supporting opposite sides but maintaining a close top-level connection to negotiate constructive outcomes.

While Russia is obviously a more powerful country overall, Turkey can play a stronger hand in certain settings and may be prepared to out-escalate Moscow on issues of great concern to Turkish national security.

For example, Russia generally holds the upper hand over Turkey in the conflict over Syria's Idlib region, but needs Turkish cooperation to ensure effective, low-cost conflict management. In Libya, Turkey out-escalated Russia's covert involvement by moving to a direct intervention in late 2019/early 2020; and Turkey and its Azerbaijani ally initiated the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, forcing Russia to adapt pragmatically to secure its interests (which, in the end, it did successfully).[109]

Aware of the limits to Russian influence over Turkey and anxious to preserve a relationship that offers so many mutual benefits, while also fuelling tensions inside NATO, Russian leaders have clearly signalled that they recognise Turkey as a stakeholder in all three conflicts and that they will seek a brokered outcome or conflict management process rather than a full-on victory for their own side. It is nonetheless likely that Russia would be less forgiving if Turkey were to meddle too actively in issues of greater relevance to Russian national security, such as Crimea/Ukraine.

The aggregate effect of Turkish-Russian conflict diplomacy is that, as their pattern of constructive competition is reproduced across new theatres, it restructures local politics and perceptions along a Russia-Turkey axis, thereby enhancing the influence of both countries while marginalising other – particularly Western – actors. It also serves the political needs of two presidents who appear to care deeply about issues of personal and national prestige, and who both subscribe to a vision of great power action in a multipolar world unfettered by Western dominance.

2.4.2 Greece

Greece's domestic politics were greatly affected by a financial crisis that erupted in 2009, as a consequence of long-term economic mismanagement. The crisis forced deep cuts in salaries and public welfare and led to bitter disagreements over EU (especially German) terms for a financial bailout. It also brought down Greece's traditional political establishment, and the 2015 elections were won by

[109] Hedenskog *et al.* 2020.

the leftist SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) party. As prime minister, SYRIZA's Alexis Tsipras gradually managed to clean up the economy, ending the need for EU financial support in August 2018. The following year, the premiership passed to Kyriakos Mitsotakis, of the right-wing New Democracy party.

Map 5. Greece

Greece has been a member of the EU since 1981 and of NATO since 1952, but Athens has generally tended to view Turkey as a more urgent security problem than the Soviet Union or Russia. Greek leaders see Turkey as an overbearing, aggressive neighbour that harbours "neo-Ottoman expansionist aspirations."[110]

[110] *Euronews* 2020.

While these tensions are rooted in a traumatic shared history, they are also fuelled by boundary disputes, opposing maritime claims, and the Cyprus conflict (see 2.3.1).

Greece was traditionally the country within NATO that maintained the closest relationship with the Soviet Union and Russia, largely due to its fear of Turkey and a suspicion that Western powers would, for security reasons, feel compelled to lean to Ankara's side should conflict erupt in the Aegean Sea. Athens also sought close ties with Arab states and offered support for the Palestinian cause, partly as a means of winning Arab support for itself and for Cyprus in the UN. As a result, Greek ties with Israel were cold and distant.

In the past decade, however, Greece's traditional orientation has changed. Mirroring Turkey's drift toward cooperation with Russia and hostility toward Israel, Greece's security ties with the United States have deepened and the country has built new ties with Israel and Israel-friendly, US-backed Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Similarly, France's poor relations with Turkey have translated into a rapid strengthening of Franco-Greek security cooperation, culminating in the signing of a bilateral mutual defence pact in 2021.

Greece's pro-Western tilt in security affairs appears to be well anchored across the political spectrum. Indeed, Greece began to move closer to the United States under the Tsipras government, notwithstanding its initial flirtation with Russia and the Greek left's traditionally critical view of the US foreign policy. The trend then accelerated after the conservative electoral victory in July 2019.

In large part, of course, the Greek change reflects Turkey's strategic reorientation, including Erdoğan's hostile and anti-Western rhetoric, Turkey's now frequent resort to military force, and the growth of Turkish-Russian collaboration (see 2.4.1). But the shift also has roots in diplomatic initiatives pioneered by Greece in the security and energy domains. Partly in fear of Turkish "restrictions and blackmail" in the energy domain, Athens has come to view the development of an eastern Mediterranean gas industry with great enthusiasm.[111] It has accordingly embraced cooperation with regional states, co-founding the EMGF and promoting the East Med pipeline project.[112]

Although Athens could not credibly stand up to Turkey's naval provocations in 2019 and 2020 (see 2.3.1), it did not come out of the crisis empty-handed. There was a groundswell of diplomatic support for Greece, and the vocal reactions of its anti-Turkish partners in Europe and the Middle East have helped reinforce these new relationships. Notably, France made a point of sending fighter jets and warships to participate in military drills with Greece, as did the United Arab

[111] *In* 2019.
[112] Sotiriou 2020; Stergiou 2019, pp. 18-9.

Emirates.[113] Security cooperation with Israel also deepened, including through joint military exercises and a $1.68 billion defence deal in April 2021, under which Israel's Elbit Systems will construct a high-tech training centre for the Hellenic Air Force.[114] Egypt, for its part, has helped counter Turkey's maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli government in Libya (see 2.4.1 and 3.1.3) by delimiting Greek-Egypt maritime boundaries, in an August 2020 deal favourable to Greek claims in the Mediterranean.[115] In 2021, France and Greece signed a bilateral defence pact (see below).[116]

Similarly, Washington's intensified security cooperation with Greece stems from concerns over Turkey's strategic direction. Since 2018, the US government has stationed drones at Larisa Air Base in central Greece. It was already using Souda Bay, on Crete, a key naval base in the region that supports US carrier groups.[117] In 2019, the United States and Greece agreed to expand US basing rights and improve infrastructure in Alexandroupoulis in western Thrace, which will facilitate US links to Bulgaria and Romania while bypassing Turkey. The area has also seen the construction of offshore LNG facilities, which will be able to receive US, Egyptian, and other shipments of gas, either for use in Greece or for onward transport.[118] Through the 2019 Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, the US Congress mandated US support for Greek-Israeli-Cypriot cooperation, lifted the US arms embargo on Cyprus, and criticised Turkey.[119] In October 2021, finally, an US-Greek military cooperation took a leap forward through the signing of an improved five-year defence cooperation extension.[120] Among other things, it provided for increased US access to Greek military facilities like Souda Bay, Alexandroupolis, Larisa, and Stefanovikeio, in central Greece.

Greek Maritime and Naval Issues

The maritime domain is crucial to the economy and security of Greece, a partially-archipelagic nation made up of more than 2,000 islands and whose commercial fleet is the largest in the world, accounting for 17.6 per cent of global shipping tonnage.[121] Determined to exploit its geography to the fullest, Greece appears to be positioning itself as a central waystation for Asian-European seaborne trade,

[113] *Le Monde* 2020; *Kathimerini* 2020; *Kathimerini* 2021.
[114] Blavoukos 2021.
[115] Butler & Gümrükçü 2019; Hamdallah 2020.
[116] Bauer 2021.
[117] Youssef 2018.
[118] Pekic 2021.
[119] U.S. Congress (n.d.).
[120] Knickmeyer 2021.
[121] UNCTAD 2020.

notably by granting a 35-year concession in 2019 to China's Cosco to operate the large container port of Pireaus, Athens.[122]

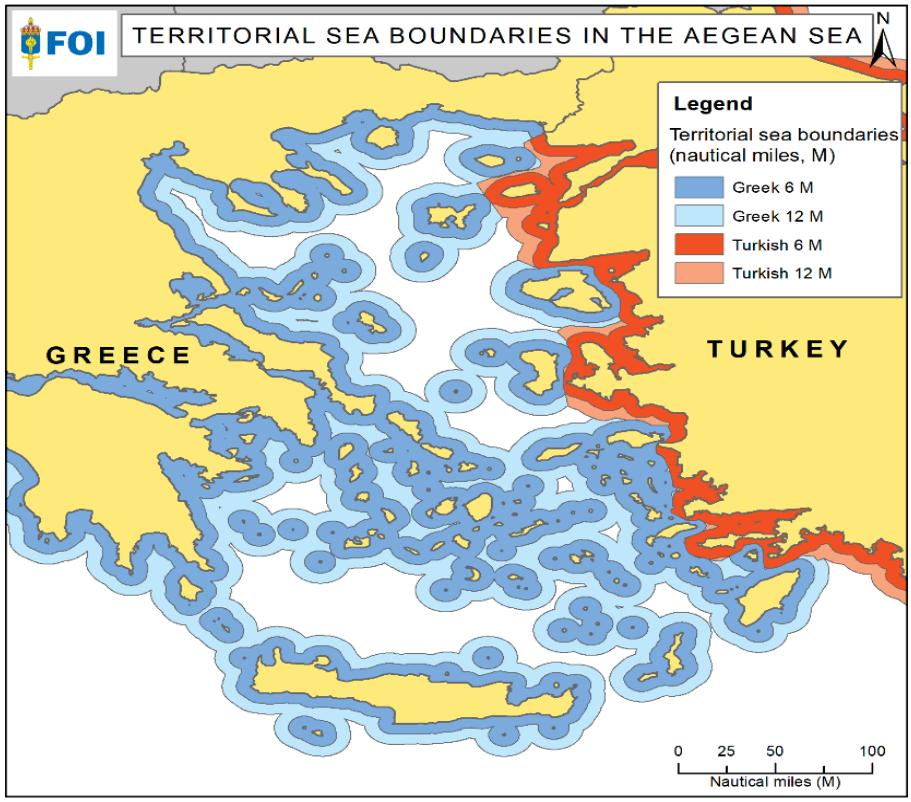
However, Greece's dependence on maritime trade and its archipelagic geography also creates challenges in the security domain, notably in relation to its arch-rival Turkey (see 2.3.1).

Although Greece recently settled its maritime boundaries with Italy and Albania, Greek control over strategically located isles and reefs close to the Turkish mainland, especially in the Aegean Sea, continues to be contested by Turkey. Since 1995, Turkey has publicly threatened Greece with war if the country were ever to try to realise its right under UNCLOS to claim the full 12 M territorial water limit in the Aegean Sea, instead of the current 6 M.[123] Such an expansion would severely restrict Turkey's ability to move ships and aircraft along its western coast and to and from the Turkish Straits. Greece remains adamant about its lawful right to 12 M, but has so far chosen not to test Turkey's red line.

The Greek government has, however unilaterally extended its Aegan airspace to 10 M. The decision is controversial and has not met with international approval, since airspace boundaries normally follow the maximum extent of a country's territorial waters. Unsurprisingly, Turkey refuses to acknowledge the extension and routinely stages demonstrative overflights, drawing Greek protests.

In the Levantine Sea, too, Turkey rejects Greek claims to a far-ranging exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that would be based, in part, on the location of the small island of Kastellorizo (see 2.3.1). Turkey also complains that Greece violates past agreements to keep the eastern islands permanently demilitarised. The Greek side argues that these agreements no longer apply and that they have, in any event, been voided by Turkey's aggressive actions in Cyprus and elsewhere. Turkey refuses to accept these arguments.

[122] Van der Putten 2016, pp. 340-3.
[123] *Hürriyet Daily News* 2020.



Map 6. Territorial Sea Boundaries in the Aegean Sea

A more recent source of Greek-Turkish tension is the Turkish government's use of migration and border controls as a pressure tactic on the EU, and especially Greece. The 2015 migrant crisis, which significantly affected EU cooperation and the domestic politics of several European nations, was partly caused by Turkey opening its border to migrant traffic (see Figure 8). It prompted the EU to strike a deal with Ankara the following year, under which Turkey committed to securing its border and take back asylum seekers in return for various political concessions and some 6 billion euros in economic assistance.[124]

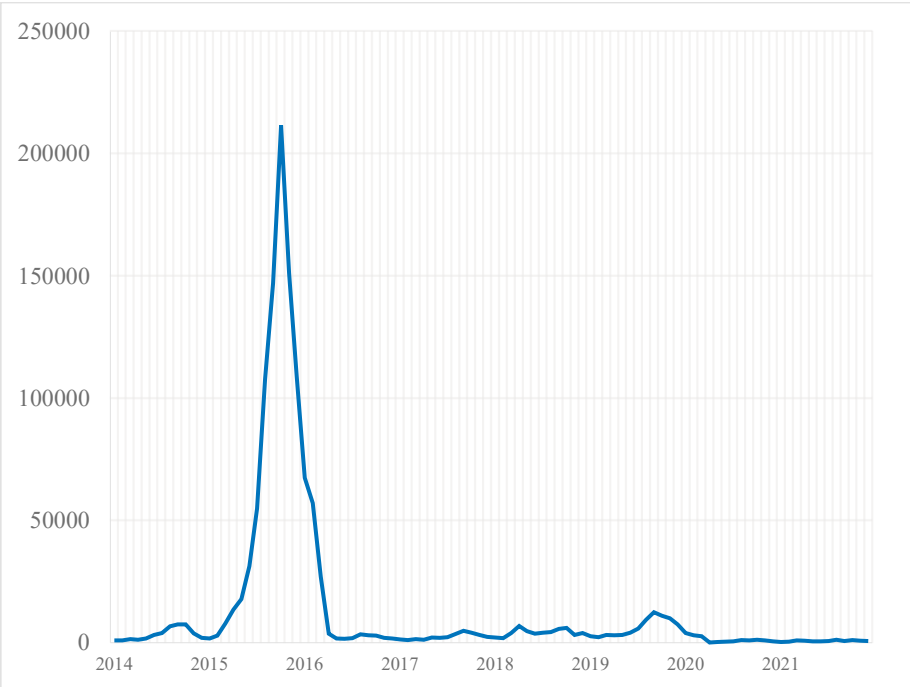
As the deal neared its expiration date, in late 2019, Turkey again relaxed migration controls, albeit more briefly. The same thing may well happen again, whenever Ankara feels that it must put pressure on the EU.[125]

The Turkish tactics have caused great concern in Athens, not just because they produce social and political tensions in Greece itself, but also because many European countries are now clearly reluctant to address Turkish misbehaviour for fear of triggering new migration crises. Greece and Cyprus fear that, over time,

[124] Terry 2021.
[125] *Ibid.*

their interests will be sacrificed to appease Ankara; and that intra-European feuding over how to handle Turkey will weaken their clout in the EU on other issues, as well. Indeed, to policymakers in Athens and Nicosia, the union's bitter internal divisions in the face of Turkish maritime provocations in 2020 (see 2.3.1) were a chilling preview of problems to come.

Figure 8. Monthly sea/land migrant arrivals to Greece, 2014–21. Source: UNHCR n.d.



As could be expected, Greece has historically spent significant sums on defence, but investment in the military contracted after 2010, in response to the economic crisis.[126] Greece currently possesses the sixth-largest armed forces in Europe and the 16,000-strong Hellenic Navy operates 13 frigates and 11 German-built submarines.[127] Headquartered on Salamis Island, outside Athens, and with bases on Crete and other islands, the navy's units are distributed across three regional commands:

- the Northern Greece Naval Command, which is headquartered in Thessaloniki and responsible for the northern Aegean Sea and Greek coastal regions;

[126] IISS 2021, p. 109.
[127] *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 111.

- the Aegean Sea Naval Command, which is headquartered in Piraeus and handles most of Greece's Aegean archipelago and its southern shores;
- the Ionian Sea Naval Command, in Patras, which manages the waters west of the Greek mainland.[128]

Greece remains incapable of effectively competing with Turkey in the naval domain. While the Turkish Navy kept improving and stocking up on new ships through the 2010s, Hellenic Navy modernisation plans were hampered by the 2009 financial crisis. Athens nonetheless pushed through with a costly acquisition of modern German submarines, but failed to upgrade its aging inventory of major surface combatants.[129]

Once the 2020 Greek-Turkish tensions brought the naval force disparity into focus, and with Turkey now on track to close the submarine technology gap, Athens moved quickly to purchase 24 Rafale fighters and three new *Belharra*-class frigates from France. Significant though they are, these acquisitions will still leave Greece at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Turkey. Importantly, however, the arms deals also facilitated the conclusion of a September 2021 pact that saw France and Greece make a bilateral commitment to defend each other's territorial integrity – a high priority for Athens, given its lack of faith in the EU and NATO as shields against Turkey's naval pressure tactics.[130] It is, however, far from clear that the pact would commit France to defending Greece in a battle over its EEZ claims.[131]

Russian-Greek Relations

For a country in the NATO/EU camp, Greece has long had unusually warm relations with Russia. While it is assisted by a mutual affirmation of historical and cultural-religious commonalities, the basis of the relationship is a keen understanding of power realities: Greece's US and European allies would depend more on Turkey than on Greece in the event of conflict with Russia, and are therefore unlikely to offer full protection in the event of a Turco-Greek war. For similar reasons, the Republic of Cyprus also pursued friendly relations with the Soviet Union and now Russia.[132]

The SYRIZA-led government that ruled Greece from 2015 to 2019 included pro-Russian elements, and, as Greece feuded with Berlin and Brussels over financial issues, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras sought to balance the Western European powers by moving closer to Moscow. To the great dismay of many US and EU leaders, Tsipras repeatedly broke ranks to criticise EU policies on Ukraine and the

[128] Hellenic Navy n.d.
[129] *Economist* 2020; *Nuclear Threat Initiative* (n.d.); Waters 2021, pp. 84-5.
[130] Bauer 2021.
[131] Tertrais 2021.
[132] Stergiou 2017, pp. 107-8

sanctions on Russia, including during an April 2015 trip to Moscow and again when Putin visited Greece the following year.[133]

It soon became clear, however, that Russia either could not or would not offer meaningful economic assistance. Greek-Russian relations then suffered a serious blow in mid-2018, when Athens expelled two Russian diplomats accused of engaging in subversive activities to sabotage a resolution of the long-running conflict between Greece and North Macedonia that could pave the way for the latter's accession to NATO membership.[134] The deal was a success, however, and North Macedonia joined the transatlantic alliance in March 2020.[135]

For Greece, Russian-Turkish collaboration in Syria and elsewhere had also raised new questions about the wisdom of trying to balance Ankara with Moscow. During the expulsion crisis of 2018, the Greek Foreign Ministry acidly noted that Russia was now "fighting as a comrade in arms with Turkey."[136]

In December 2018, Tsipras again visited Moscow, where the two leaders agreed to turn the page.[137] Nevertheless, Russian-Greek relations remained slightly out of joint, and SYRIZA's early pro-Moscow posturing had by then given way to a determined push for deeper ties with the United States – a trend reinforced by the 2019 electoral victory of Kyriakos Mitsotakis's conservative New Democracy party.[138]

For its part, Russia tends to tread carefully in Greek-Turkish disputes, unwilling to alienate either side. The conflict over Aegean territorial waters is particularly important to Russia, since a Greek expansion of its boundary from 6 M to 12 M would also force Russian ships traveling between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to cross Greek territorial waters. Consequently, Moscow would almost certainly oppose such an expansion. Publicly, however, Russia insists that it supports UNCLOS to the letter.[139] In October 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted noncommittally that UNCLOS stipulates a right to territorial waters with a distance of 12 M even though other solutions may be applied in specific cases; he stated that Russia expects all disputes to be handled "through political dialogue" and a "search for mutually acceptable solutions in accordance with the

[133] Jones *et al.* 2015; BBC 2016.
[134] Tzogopoulos 2020.
[135] Greece had long objected to the name "Macedonia," arguing that it should be reserved for Greek areas by the same name; the conflict was bitter and suffused with historical and identitarian issues. The 2018 deal finally saw Greece accept its neighbour under the altered name "North Macedonia," which paved the way for NATO membership. *Defense News* & AP 2020.
[136] *Kathimerini* 2018; Lund 2018, pp. 21–2, 36–7.
[137] Osborn 2018.
[138] Tzogopoulos 2020.
[139] At the height of Turkish-Greek tensions in 2020, the Russian Embassy in Athens stated that UNCLOS is a "cornestone for the international maritime regime" and should be applied in the Mediterranean, too. See Russian Embassy in Athens 2020.

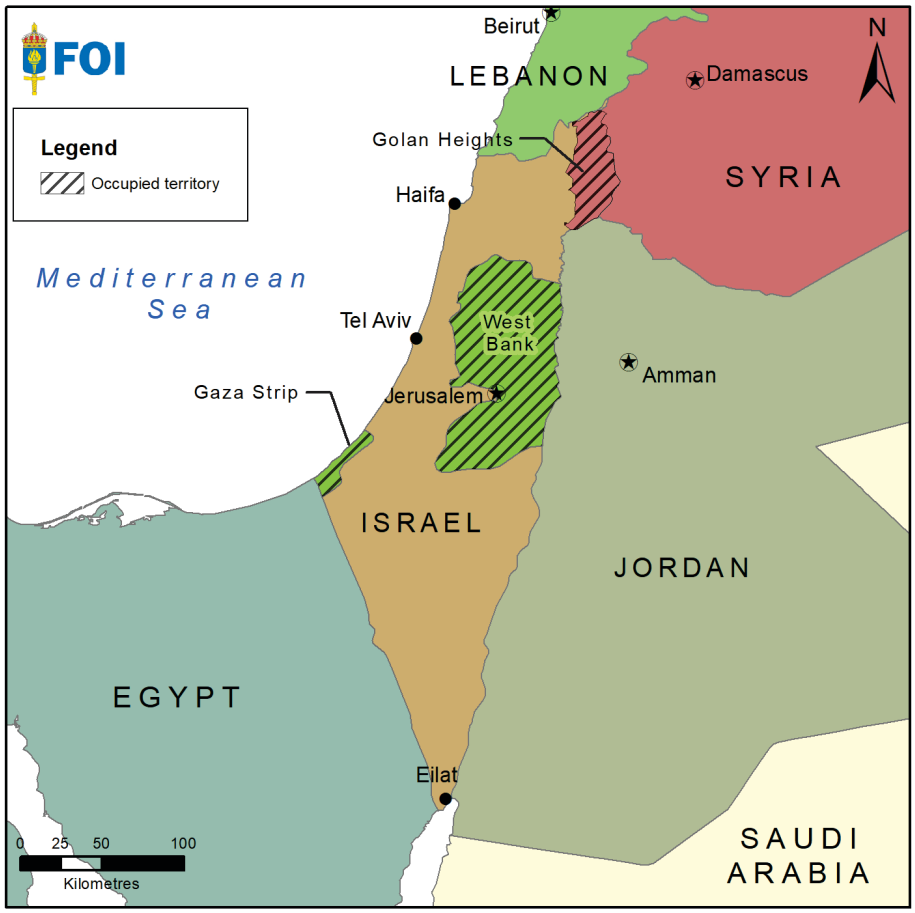
rules of international law."[140] On the other hand, Lavrov clearly sided with Greece and the UN Security Council consensus by criticising the TRNC's Turkey-backed reopening of the Greek-Cypriot Varosha area as an example of damaging "unilateral actions."[141]

Greece's increasingly close partnership with Turkey's Arab rivals, the United States, and France could potentially create friction with Russia. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to lead to a serious rupture in Russian-Greek relations. The mutual interests of the two governments are unchanged, cultural-religious commonalities remain, and both still view the other as a valuable interlocutor and a potential hedge against Turkey. Indeed, as he received Lavrov in Athens in October 2020, Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias stated that "the common denominator in all issues is the destabilising role of Turkey."[142]

2.4.3 Israel

Israel has been embroiled in a variety of conflicts since its establishment as an independent state in 1948, nearly always as the stronger party. As already noted in Section 2.3.2, Israel occupies East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip (Palestine) and the Golan Heights (Syria) since 1967.[143]

[140] Interview of Sergei Lavrov with Dimitris Manolis for the Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 26 October 2020. *Alpha Free Press* 2020.
[141] *Voria* 2020.
[142] *Euronews* 2020.
[143] In Israel's view, it has unilaterally annexed the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Israel withdrew troops and settlers from inside the Gaza Strip in 2005, but continues to control its airspace, maritime territory, borders, and trade, and to ban Palestinian access to parts of the territory. The United Nations still considers Israel to be Gaza's occupying power and does not recognise Israeli annexation of any territory captured in 1967.



Map 7. Israel

Decades of tension and conflict have been taxing for Israel, forcing it to spend heavily on national security. Despite this volatile and hostile security environment, however, Israel has not faced a credible conventional threat since the 1970s, by which time it had developed nuclear weapons and forced Egypt, the dominant Arab military power, to withdraw from the conflict.[144]

Israel's military strength is partly homegrown, drawing on the benefits of a democratic political system, a well-educated population, and an advanced economy, but it also relies on external support. The United States classifies Israel as a major non-NATO ally and grants it more support than any other nation, including an annual

[144] Israel does not admit to having nuclear weapons, in spite of "overwhelming evidence." Normark *et al.* 2005, pp. 7, 32–4.

military assistance package of some $3.8 billion.[145] Despite ongoing political disagreements over the status of Palestine, European nations generally also treat Israel favourably in the security domain. Notably, Germany supplies Israel with heavily discounted surface combatants and submarines.[146]

Over the past decade, Israel's strategic position has in many ways improved. International and regional interest in the Palestinian issue has waned due to a preoccupation with the events following the 2011 Arab Spring. In 2020, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco signed US-brokered peace agreements with Israel. The Emirati decision to recognise Israel, which facilitated the other normalisation agreements, stemmed in large part from shared fears about Iran's role in the region. Saudi Arabia takes a similar view, but has so far withheld recognition for Israel.

The 2012 election of a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt caused brief but serious concern, but President Abdelfattah al-Sisi's 2013 takeover reassured Israelis and relations have since improved.

The instability radiating from the Syrian civil war has had mixed but significant effects on Israeli security. On the one hand, it has hollowed out the Syrian military and diminished the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal, 1300 tons of which was eliminated by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, in 2013–14. Although Israel believes that Syria retains a limited chemical warfare capability, the strategic threat it once represented has largely vanished. On the other hand, the war has offered new inroads to Iran and prompted Russia's entry into the region in 2015. The Israeli Air Force nonetheless operates with seeming impunity in Syria, striking Iran-linked targets with the quiet understanding of Russia.[147]

Currently, then, Israel primarily faces nonconventional threats:

- After decades of state-supported colonisation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, Israel now appears inextricably entangled with the areas occupied in 1967, and the prospect of permanent military rule over millions of stateless Palestinians has corrosive effects on the country's domestic politics and its image abroad;
- Iran remains unrelentingly hostile to Israel, and the combination of its ballistic missile arsenal and nuclear research programme looms large in Israeli threat perceptions;

[145] Sharp 2020.
[146] *Der Spiegel* 2012; Ravid 2014.
[147] Lund 2019a, p. 30.

- The Iran-backed Hezbollah guerrilla maintains a significant missile arsenal in southern Lebanon, primarily as a deterrent against Israeli cross-border operations but also as an Iranian second-strike capability by proxy.

Israeli Maritime and Naval Issues

Until the 1990s, Israel's attention was fixed on its contested land borders and on the pursuit of technological superiority over regional competitors. As a result, successive governments took only a limited interest in Israel's naval capabilities. However, some 90 per cent of Israeli imports and exports travel by ship, and the maritime space has been described as Israel's "soft underbelly."[148] Notably, Egypt's attempt to cut Israeli access to the Red Sea by blockading the Straits of Tiran in 1967 played a key role in triggering the Six-Day War.

In recent years, Israel has enacted a "turn to the sea" by investing in offshore gas and seriously upgrading its naval capabilities, in part to secure these new energy interests.[149]

Israel first registered significant Mediterranean natural gas deposits in 1999, but major quantities were only found in 2009–10. Israel can now successfully cover most of its domestic energy needs and is emerging as a gas exporter. Through the EMGF, the East Med pipeline plans, and recent LNG export deals, Israel has begun to build strategic economic ties to Jordan, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and the EU (see 2.2.2).[150] In 2020, plans were drawn up for an Israeli-Emirati oil pipeline that would connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean from Eilat, as an alternative to the Suez/SUMED route (see 2.1.1).[151]

The Israeli Navy remains significantly smaller than the navies of the other Big Four eastern Mediterranean powers and, by design, is differently configured. The navy is not only relied upon to provide basic maritime security, collect intelligence, and protect trade and key infrastructure, but also to engage in irregular operations and bolster Israel's strategic nuclear deterrence.[152] The recent acquisition of German-built *Dolphin* submarines and *Sa'ar 6* corvettes clearly reflects this mix of missions.

Given Israel's assumption that Iran is preparing a nuclear option, which could also trigger regional proliferation, the creation of a nuclear second-strike capability has been deemed of great importance. As a solution to this problem, the *Dolphin* submarines have been modified to carry nuclear-tipped cruise missiles.[153]

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[148] Melman 2021a.
[149] Teff-Seker *et al.* 2019.
[150] *Ibid.*, p. 235.
[151] Halbfinger & Rasgon 2020.
[152] Teff-Seker *et al.* 2019, pp. 236-237.
[153] Normark *et al.* 2005, pp. 32-34; *Der Spiegel* 2012.

The Israeli Navy is also constantly engaged in what the country terms its "campaign between the wars," including through irregular special operations, interdiction of shipping, and intelligence collection primarily against Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Examples include enforcing Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip, through interception of civilian activist flotillas as well as arms-smuggling operations.[154] More recent examples include Israel's sabotage of the Syrian-Iranian trade in oil and arms (see 3.3.2).[155]

The most recent additions to Israel's naval inventory, four German-built *Sa'ar 6* corvettes, were explicitly acquired for improved protection of gas rigs and other maritime interests.[156] The navy is also needed to protect shipping and shore-based infrastructure, as 98 per cent of the country's imports arrive by sea and potable water is produced by coastal desalination plants. Close to Israeli shores, the primary threats to these assets are Iran-backed non-state actors. The dominant Palestinian group in Gaza, Hamas, has demonstrated limited naval sabotage capabilities, and during a flare-up in violence in 2021 it unsuccessfully sought to target the Tamar natural gas platform.[157] Lebanon's Hezbollah used a Chinese C-802 anti-ship missile to inflict severe damage on an Israeli *Sa'ar 5*-class corvette during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War.[158] Since then, Hezbollah may have acquired more advanced Russian-made Yakhont (P-800 Onyx) anti-ship missiles from Syria.[159]

Israel's natural gas successes have brought the disputed Lebanese-Israeli sea boundary into focus. The two countries are formally at war, complicating the exploitation of gas deposits in disputed areas. Unsuccessful US-brokered maritime boundary talks took place in 2010–12 and 2020, resuming in 2021 amid deep disagreements.[160] During the talks, Lebanon has signalled that it considers part of the Karish field, which is currently being developed by Israel, to be within its own economic zone. Hezbollah warned in October 2021 that it can and will strike at sea if, in its view, Israel tries to usurp Lebanese natural resources.[161]

Like other eastern Mediterraean countries, Israel appears to keep a close eye on the growing salience of Asia-Europe maritime trade routes (see 2.1). It has accepted major Chinese investments in maritime infrastructure: China's Shanghai International Port Group will operate Haifa Port from 2021 to 2046, and China Harbour was separately contracted to build a new port at Ashdod. The Haifa deal has created rare tension with Israel's main patron, the United States, since Chinese

[154] Lappin 2014; Kubovich & DPA 2018.
[155] Lubold *et al.* 2021.
[156] Lappin 2021.
[157] Ahronheim 2021.
[158] *Al-Manar* 2019.
[159] Entous *et al.* 2014; Bergman 2017.
[160] Rida 2021.
[161] *Al-Manar* 2021.

construction is taking place immediately adjacent to docks used by the US Sixth Fleet.[162] American officials claim that the Chinese facilities in Haifa may be used to collect intelligence and have warned Israel that it could render the port unusable for the US Navy. Israel rebuffed a request in 2020 to let the US Coast Guard perform a security review of the port.[163]

Russian-Israeli Relations

Throughout most of the Cold War, the Soviet Union armed and supported Israel's Arab enemies, and in 1967 Moscow severed diplomatic relations with Israel. Ties were restored in 1991, and since the end of the Cold War both nations have sought a positive relationship. In this, they have been aided by large-scale ex-Soviet emigration to Israel: some 12 per cent of Israelis speak Russian as their first language.[164]

Russia has nonetheless maintained its opposition to Israel's occupation of Arab territory, upholds good relations with Israeli enemies like Iran, and stands by its Soviet-era recognition of the State of Palestine.[165] Israel has repeatedly sought to dissuade Russia from selling advanced air-defence and naval missiles to Iran and Syria.[166] Russia has at times been sensitive to Israel's complaints, which tend to be reinforced by US pressure, but also instrumentalises the arms export issue as a source of leverage.

Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria has changed Israel's strategic environment and led to intensified high-level Israeli-Russian contacts. Russian cooperation with the Syrian government, Iran, and Hezbollah clearly posed a strategic problem, but Israel also saw new opportunities. Given the generally good working relations between Russia and Israel, the country hoped that Moscow would be able to serve as a useful, pragmatic interlocutor in Syria and perhaps also as a restraining influence on Iran.[167]

The results have been mixed. On the one hand, Russia does not appear to have put significant pressure on Iran in Syria, presumably because it lacks the means to do so and has no intention of undermining the Assad regime, which is closely tied to Iran. On the other hand, Russia has refrained from obstructing Israel's aerial campaign against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, on the understanding that Israel must not seriously destabilise the Syrian government or put Russian nationals at risk.[168]

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[162] Nir 2020.
[163] Harel 2021a.
[164] Krasna 2018, p. 10.
[165] Anishchuk 2011.
[166] *Times of Israel* 2020.
[167] Krasna 2018, p. 9; Lund 2019a, pp. 29-30.
[168] Lund 2019a, p. 30.

In September 2018, the Russian-Israeli arrangement came under strain, when Syrian air defence batteries downed a Russian Il-20 signals intelligence aircraft over the Mediterranean during an Israeli air raid, killing all fifteen people on board. Moscow accused Israel of having used the Il-20 as cover for its attack, deliberately gambling with Russian lives. In a rare public act of retaliation, Russia announced that it would grant Syria a free-of-charge donation of S-300 air defence systems. Putin also refused to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu over a six-month period. Israeli air strikes in Syria nonetheless quickly resumed and in early 2019 the crisis seemed to be over.[169]

Russian and Israeli interests have also clashed in the maritime sphere. As noted in Section 3.3.2, since late 2020 Russia's Mediterranean Task Force has escorted Iranian ships headed for Syria, protecting them against Israeli attacks. Even so, a Russian-protected Iranian container vessel en route to Latakia in March 2021, the *Shahr-e Kord*, reportedly came under attack "when the Russian escort was far enough away for the Israelis to strike."[170]

Mindful of Russia's capacity to damage Israeli interests, Israeli leaders generally try not to antagonise Moscow over unrelated political and diplomatic matters, even at the cost of friction with partners in the United States and Europe. In 2014, for example, Israeli UN diplomats chose to absent themselves from a General Assembly vote against Russia's annexation of Crimea, drawing a rare rebuke from the United States; and in 2018, the United Kingdom criticised Israel for its unwillingness to condemn Russia's role in the Skripal nerve agent poisoning.[171]

As a new powerbroker in the eastern Mediterranean region, with the ability to constrain Israel's freedom of action on sensitive security issues, Russia has clearly improved its leverage over Israel. Overall, Russian-Israeli contacts are likely to remain close but complicated, with areas of open tension tempered by a positive-spirited pragmatism on both sides. The end of Netanyahu's long tenure as prime minister in June 2021 has not visibly altered these dynamics, and is unlikely to do so given the clear mutual focus on transactional bargaining and state interests.

2.4.4 Egypt

Strategically located in the heart of the Middle East and North Africa region and with a population of some 106 million, Egypt has long aspired to Arab leadership. Since the 1970s, however, Cairo's actual influence has been far more limited, in part because of its economic weakness.

[169] *Ha'aretz* 2018; TASS 2018c; Keinon 2019. It remains unclear to what extent Syrian forces control the S-300s.
[170] Sutton 2020; Harel 2021b; Kingsley *et al*. 2021.
[171] *Jerusalem Post* 2014; Keinon 2018.

Map 8. Egypt

The 2011 Arab Spring revolt, which deposed long-time president Hosni Mubarak and paved the way for democratic elections, left Egypt in financial and political disarray. A new Muslim Brotherhood leadership failed to stabilise the domestic scene, but brought Egypt into alignment with Qatar and Turkey in the region's power struggles. In 2013, then defence minister Abdelfattah al-Sisi's coup d'état saw Egypt whiplash to the rival Emirati-Saudi camp.

Since seizing power, Sisi has purged the Brotherhood and restored stability through authoritarian means. He has spent lavishly on the military, establishing Egypt as the world's third-largest arms importer in 2016–20.[172] Despite considerable financial support from his Gulf benefactors, however, his government has had little success in addressing Egypt's deep socioeconomic malaise, which remains a threat to long-term stability.

[172] Wezeman *et al.* 2021, p. 10.

Egyptian Maritime and Naval Issues

Egypt's army is the largest in the region and its armed forces display "a developing capacity to deploy independently beyond its borders," making the country an attractive partner to external actors.[173] But despite a 2,000 km coastline and the Suez Canal's centrality to world trade and security, Egypt has not historically been a naval power of significance. Cairo's relative lack of attention to naval affairs is all the more remarkable considering that some 90 per cent of Egypt's foreign trade is seaborne, mainly via the port of Alexandria, while Suez Canal fees brought in some $5.5 billion in 2019.[174]

In recent years, this has begun to change. The natural gas discoveries of the 2010s and the formation of the EMGF (see 2.2.2) have refocused Egypt's attention on maritime affairs, as has the growing volume of trade passing through the Suez Canal (see 2.1.1).

Fears that Egypt's political turmoil after 2011 would threaten Suez shipping have so far proven unfounded, notwithstanding rare incidents.[175] Somali piracy at the southern end of the Red Sea has also diminished since the early 2010s, although the eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf region have recently seen politically motivated attacks on shipping by Yemen's Houthi movement, Iran, and Israel (see 3.3.2).[176]

Concerns about maritime security appear to have informed Egypt's decision to join Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Jordan, and the Saudi-backed Yemeni government to establish the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (often referred to as the Red Sea Council) in January 2020.[177] In practice, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the true heavyweights in the council, and although its establishment may have been a Saudi initiative, it is Egypt that has most to offer in terms of naval assets.

Over the past decade, Egypt has engaged in a substantial naval buildup, originally launched in response to a 2011 government study that revealed structural and material shortcomings, but also benefitting from a jump in overall military spending after Sisi's 2013 takeover. The goals of the programme include equipping the navy to cope with post-2011 regional insecurity; safeguarding Egypt's maritime borders and natural gas assets; protecting Red Sea/Suez shipping lanes; and creating a capability for out-of-area maritime security and amphibious operations, possibly with an eye to buttressing Egypt's attractiveness as a partner

[173] IISS 2021, p. 333.
[174] Taimur Akram 2020.
[175] Starr 2014.
[176] Gaskinska (ed.) 2019, p. 56-8; Lubold *et al.* 2021.
[177] Sharqawi 2020.

and security provider for the wealthy but militarily fragile Gulf Arab oil monarchies.[178]

In line with these plans, the navy has since 2011 been divided into northern (Mediterranean) and southern (Red Sea) branches. The former is headquartered in Alexandria's Ras al-Tin base and the latter in Safaga. Three new naval bases have been established at Ras Banas (Red Sea), Gargoub (northwestern Egypt), and Port Said (in the Suez Canal area).[179]

Since 2012, the navy has acquired a number of modern submarines, frigates, corvettes, and other ships. In the five-year period leading up to 2020, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that Egypt received "1 frigate [and] 2 amphibious assault ships […] from France; 3 submarines from Germany; 1 frigate from Italy; […] 46 ship-borne combat helicopters from Russia; and 1 corvette from South Korea" and by the end of 2020 "outstanding deliveries to Egypt included 1 submarine and 4 frigates from Germany, 1 frigate from Italy, [and] 3 frigates from France."[180] Additional recent purchases have come from China and the United States. In contrast to Turkey's determined efforts to develop a domestic naval industry, Egypt generally buys warships off the shelf with little fidelity to specific producers, and, as seen above, the result is a very diverse ship inventory.[181]

The flagship investment of Egypt's naval expansion plan was the 2016 acquisition of two French-built *Mistral*-class helicopter carriers/amphibious assault ships.[182] The *Mistral* carriers had originally been sold to Russia, but the French government cancelled the deal in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Cairo then stepped in to pick up both of the unsold ships: the *Vladivostok* became the *Gamal Abdel-Nasser* and the *Sevastopol* became the *Anwar al-Sadat*.[183]

The Egyptian Navy has participated in a large number of international military exercises in recent years, not only with new Mediterranean partners such as Greece, Cyprus, and France but also with Gulf Arab states, the United States, and Russia. Observers noted a large number of Egyptian military drills with other nations in 2020, several of which involved naval or amphibious capabilities.[184]

[178] Abul-Ezz 2020.
[179] *Ibid.*
[180] Wezeman *et al.* 2021, p. 10.
[181] Waters 2021, p. 87.
[182] Abul-Ezz 2020.
[183] Othman 2016.
[184] *Al-Arab* 2020, p. 6.

Russian-Egyptian Relations

Under president Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1954–70) Egypt was Moscow's closest partner in the Middle East and a major recipient of Soviet and Eastern Bloc military aid.[185] As part of a process that also involved making peace with Israel, Abdel-Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat (1970–81), switched Egypt's Cold War allegiance to the United States. The Soviet Union's position in the region suffered greatly, forcing Moscow to reorient itself toward Syria.[186]

Russia was nonetheless troubled by the downfall of Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, in 2011, fearing that the collapse of Egypt's established order would unleash a surge of instability and Islamism. Russian leaders kept appearances up and worked to secure good relations with Cairo even after the election of a Muslim Brotherhood president in 2012, but were visibly delighted when Sisi seized power a year later. Sisi's anti-Islamist, authoritarian militarism appeals to Kremlin sensibilities and Putin has praised him as Egypt's saviour.[187] Moscow and Cairo share broadly similar perspectives on many of the region's crises, including Libya, Syria, and Palestine, and Foreign Minister Sami Shukri was one of few Arab leaders to offer immediate support for the 2015 Russian intervention in Syria.[188]

Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates – which is Sisi's closest regional partner – have made common cause in Libya in support of Khalifa Haftar's eastern-Libyan forces against their Turkey-backed rivals in Tripoli (see 3.3.2 and 2.4.1).[189] In summer 2020, as the Ankara-backed forces pushed eastward, Sisi warned that he was ready to intervene militarily on Haftar's side.[190] The threat came alongside quiet Russian signs of aerial escalation, and likely represented a coordinated warning to Turkey. The war then settled into a stalemate and the UN peace process resumed, but the situation remains volatile. Egyptian-Turkish relations have since seen some improvement amid a more general de-escalation among Middle Eastern nations, but major disagreements remain.[191]

Under Sisi, Egyptian-Russian trade, diplomatic contacts, and military cooperation have expanded. Among other things, Egypt is a major buyer of Russian wheat, and in 2015 Sisi and Putin signed a $10 billion contract to let ROSATOM, the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, construct Egypt's first nuclear plant.[192] Putin and Sisi have met many times since 2013, and in 2018 the two presidents signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation, which entered into force in January 2021. Among other things, it mandates annual state visits,

[185] Nizameddin 1999, p. 24; Vasiliev 2020, pp. 35–6.
[186] Lund 2019a, pp. 5–6.
[187] President of Russia 2014.
[188] Magdi 2015.
[189] Harchaoui 2021.
[190] Abdelmegid 2020.
[191] Wahid Hanna 2021.
[192] Abdelmegid 2015.

foreign minister visits, and regular "2+2 meetings" between the two countries' foreign and defence ministers.[193] In October 2019, Putin and Sisi co-hosted the first Russia-Africa Summit, in Sochi.[194]

On the military side, Egypt and Russia signed an agreement in late 2015 to simplify the process for Russian naval port visits.[195] In 2017, the two countries also apparently considered a deal that would grant Russia access to Egyptian airbases, which caused serious concern in Washington.[196]

Russia has been the main beneficiary of Egypt's attempts to diversify military procurement and break a decades-long reliance on US defence manufacturers, especially after the 2014–15 suspension of US sales in response to Sisi's coup. As a result, Russia sold more weapons to Egypt than any other country in 2017–20.[197] Egypt has brushed off US protests at its deepening military relationship with Russia, defying threats of sanctions and aid cuts by importing Su-35S jet fighters and Ka-52K attack helicopters (for its *Mistral* carriers).[198] Russia also donated a *Tarantul*-class missile boat to the Egyptian navy in 2015, presumably in the hope of whetting Cairo's appetite for continued naval acquisitions.[199]

The security-centric nature of the Russian-Egyptian relationship has since 2015 been underlined by regular military drills, including naval exercises.[200] In November 2020, a joint Russian-Egyptian drill took place in the Black Sea, reportedly with a focus on how to secure sea lanes, handle suspicious vessels, and conduct amphibious operations. Egyptian and other commentators interpreted it as a demonstration of new Egyptian capabilities and a warning to Turkey.[201]

Egypt's warm ties to Russia should not, however, be overstated. Both Russia and Egypt have denied having any intention to "replace" the post-Sadat US-Egyptian relationship, and American-Egyptian security ties remain strong.[202] Egypt is an officially designated major non-NATO ally of the United States and has received approximately $1.3 billion in military assistance every year since its 1979 peace agreement with Israel.[203] Sisi himself once studied at the US Army War College, and from 2017 to 2021 he enjoyed a famously friendly relationship with US President Donald Trump, who publicly greeted him as "my favourite dictator."[204]

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[193] Ezzeddine 2021.
[194] Abdel Zaher 2019.
[195] Naval Agreement 2015.
[196] Kirkpatrick 2017.
[197] SIPRI n.d.; *Al-Ahram* 2014.
[198] *Al-Monitor* 2021.
[199] *Al-Ahram* 2015; *Al-Ahram* 2016.
[200] Qadi 2018; Urcosta 2021.
[201] ECSS 2020; Urcosta 2021.
[202] El Gundy *et al.* 2013.
[203] Sharp 2019.
[204] Youssef *et al.* 2019.

In sum, Russia views Egypt as an important country in the region, whose views often dovetail with Moscow's own, and also as a major market for Russian wheat and arms. Egypt is also of interest to Russia in its role as an emerging gas exporter to the EU and as a regional counterweight to Turkey, notably in Libya. Egyptian leaders appear to hold broadly similar views of Russia. They may also be showcasing the Russian connection to remind their American allies of Egypt's importance to US security and foreign policy.

3 Soviet and Russian Naval Power in the Mediterranean

Published in 2015, the Russian Maritime Doctrine states that the Russian Navy should sustain a "permanent" presence in the Mediterranean Sea. In contrast, a "sufficient" and "periodical" naval presence is deemed sufficient for the Atlantic and Indian oceans, respectively.[205] The doctrine thus underscores the high importance accorded to the Mediterranean Sea in Russian strategic thinking: apart from those seas where Russia is itself a coastal state, no other maritime region is granted the same level of attention. The reasons are straightforward: without unfettered access to the Mediterranean, shipping from Russia's important Black Sea warm-water ports would be impossible, and the geographically fragmented Russian Navy would lose its primary link between the country's western and eastern coasts.

Nonetheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 effectively ended Moscow's capacity to project naval power in the region. It was not until the 2010s that Russia managed to regain the capability to sustain a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The current naval grouping, which was set up in 2013, is considerably smaller than its Soviet predecessor. However, the establishment of a new air base in 2015 and the expansion of an existing naval facility in Syria, which was concluded in 2019–20 with the construction of a naval repair shop, provide Moscow with an unprecedented capacity to project air and sea power in the eastern Mediterranean region.

3.1 The Soviet Navy and the Eastern Mediterranean

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the world entered a new era of global competition between the world's two sole superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

As the struggle for global influence intensified in the 1950s, East-West tensions gradually began to filter out of Europe toward Asia, Africa, and South America. Then still in the early stages of decolonisation, the Third World was about to become a highly active scene for the ideological and military struggles of the Cold War, as new governments and liberation movements vied for superpower support.

Amid this broader shift, the eastern Mediterranean region emerged as a particularly hot Cold War theatre. The creation of Israel in 1948 spurred decades of Arab-Israeli conflict, which, although local in its origins, had soon become enmeshed with the Cold War politics of the day. Arab nationalists in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and

[205] President of Russia 2015.

other countries were already ill-disposed toward Western colonialism, and they would soon find that neither the United States nor Western Europe could be counted on to provide support in their struggle against Israel, but the Eastern Bloc had no such inhibitions.

The Soviet Navy

After playing a rather modest role during the Second World War, the Soviet Navy commenced a naval build-up in the 1950s to challenge the US Navy on the world's seas.The Cold War Soviet Navy was composed of five major formations operating in five separate maritime regions:

- The Northern Fleet (Barents Sea/Atlantic Ocean)
- The Pacific Fleet (Japanese Sea/Pacific Ocean)
- The Baltic Fleet* (Baltic Sea/Northern Sea)
- The Black Sea Fleet (Black Sea/Mediterranean Sea)
- The Caspian Flotilla (Caspian Sea)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union altered Russia's access to the Baltic and the Black Sea. The overall naval structure of four fleets and one separate flotilla was nonetheless retained by the Russian Federation.

** Including the, then, separate Leningrad Naval Base*

After a slow start marked by Arab hostility to Soviet Communist doctrines and Stalin's early (but brief) support for Israel, Moscow began to make serious inroads in the Middle East in the mid-1950s by offering modern arms and political backing. The 1956 Suez Crisis, in which Moscow forcefully opposed a joint Israeli-French-British attack on Egypt, helped boost the regional standing of the Soviet Union, while also serving as a propaganda coup for President Gamal Abdel-Nasser's government in Cairo. A charismatic leader not only of the Arab World's largest state, but of the Arab nationalist cause more generally, Abdel-Nasser now emerged as the Middle East's by far most influential political figure. The Soviet Union's political stock rose with his. As Arab nationalist revolutionaries and coup plotters toppled one conservative Arab government after the other, Moscow developed extensive political and economic interests in the region.[206]

The Soviet Union's formerly limited naval posture in the region began to grow after the 1958 Lebanon and Jordan crises, in which the United States and the United Kingdom briefly dispatched troops to the region amid fears of pro-Egyptian takeovers. Moscow initiated an ambitious naval build-up to counter the US Sixth Fleet and other NATO naval forces in the Mediterranean, but it faced considerable difficulties. In particular, the Soviet Navy lacked a regional support infrastructure of the kind available to the United States and its allies.

Given the rocky relationship between the Soviet Union and Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia, the only reliably Soviet-allied Communist state with ports on the Mediterranean was Albania. In 1958, an agreement was signed to let Soviet submarines undergo service in the Albanian port of Vlorë, which facilitated a substantial rise in the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean. However, activity

[206] Lund 2019a, pp. 4-5.

plummeted again when the Soviet Navy was kicked out of Albania in 1961, a casualty of the Sino-Soviet split.[207]

From the Kremlin's point of view, the timing of Albania's defection was highly inauspicious. The strategic importance of the Mediterranean was rising rapidly, after the United States had begun to patrol the area with submarines equipped with *Polaris*, a nuclear-tipped intermediate range ballistic missile.[208] The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis led to the removal of land-based medium-range ballistic missiles in Italy and Turkey.[209] But even then, submarines armed with *Polaris* missiles continued to lurk under the surface of the eastern Mediterranean, leading Moscow to conclude that the Soviet Union needed to firm up its naval presence.

3.1.1 The Soviet 5th Mediterranean Squadron, 1967–92

Soviet Mediterranean patrols increased again slightly from the mid-1960s, much thanks to the commissioning of new naval ships and submarines, but support infrastructure remained scarce.

Albania and Yugoslavia were still outside the pro-Soviet camp, and although Moscow had developed excellent relations with several Arab nations in the Mediterranean region, including Egypt, Syria, and Algeria, none of them proved willing to fully align with the Eastern Bloc by welcoming Soviet troops and bases. Their reticence was partly rooted in nationalist and post-colonial sensitivities related to the presence of foreign troops, but also in a recognition of the fact that the Cold War environment offered more leverage to states that had not shifted fully to either side. Last but not least, all of the pro-Soviet Arab states publicly supported the non-aligned movement, in which Abdel-Nasser had established himself as a prominent leader.

The real enhancement of the Soviet Union's regional naval posture would take place only after June 1967, when, after weeks of Arab threats and sabre-rattling, Israel suddenly lashed out and crushed the military forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in what became known as the Six-Day War. The war left Israel in control of large Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian territories, including the holy sites in eastern Jerusalem, and it was a major shock to the Arab World. The events of June 1967 also brought the Israeli-Arab conflict to the centre of Cold War tensions and served as a blow to the prestige of the Soviet Union, whose top-of-the-line military equipment now littered the battlefield. To preserve face and regain leverage, Moscow dialled-up its media campaign against Israel, cut off diplomatic ties (they

[207] McCormick 1987, p. 6.
[208] Norris & Kristensen 2016.
[209] Loeb 1976.

would remain severed until 1991), and began to replenish the Syrian and Egyptian arsenals in order to re-establish Arab military power.[210]

The Soviet Union also moved to establish a permanent framework for its naval presence in the Mediterranean – a process facilitated by two factors.

- On the organisational level, there had already been plans in early 1967 to create a permanent staff for a Mediterranean task force. Although their composition would remain a mix of Northern, Baltic, and Black Sea Fleet vessels, the Mediterranean operations were to be endowed with a stable command structure to increase continuity and enable long-term planning. Shortly after the war, the *5th Operational Mediterranean Squadron* (hereafter: "the 5th Mediterranean Squadron") was formed and subordinated to the Black Sea Fleet.[211]
- On the material and logistical level, the Soviet need for a Mediterranean support infrastructure was finally about to resolve itself. The battered governments in Cairo and Damascus were now in desperate need of Soviet military aid, diplomatic cover, and protection to regain their footing. Recognising that the balance had shifted, both Abdel-Nasser and Syria's Baath Party government showed new flexibility by opening their ports to the Soviet Navy. Access to the Egyptian ports of Mersa Matrouh, Port Said, and, especially, Alexandria, substantially improved the logistical support of the new 5th Mediterranean Squadron, and a Soviet composite naval aviation regiment operating out of Egyptian air bases would also be on hand to support expanded naval operations.

In October 1973, Abdel-Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat, joined forces with Syria's new leader, Hafez al-Assad, to launch a surprise attack on Israel. With most of Israel celebrating the Yom Kippur holiday, the country was initially caught off guard, but the tide soon turned, and Israel ended the war bruised but once again dominant. The Soviet Union found itself forced to threaten a military intervention to stop Israeli advances, to which the United States responded by placing its nuclear forces on alert. As the conflict ground to a halt, Washington took charge of ceasefire diplomacy.

Disenchanted with Soviet support and despairing of the possibility of a military victory over Israel, Sadat appeared to have been hoping for such an outcome all along. He began to negotiate a permanent peace deal with Israel and eventually moved over to the Cold War's Western camp, shattering the Soviet-Egyptian

[210] Vasiliev 2020, pp. 63-75.
[211] Koryakovtsev & Tashlykov 2017.

partnership established by Abdel-Nasser two decades prior.[212] Sadat's defection was a gamechanger for the Middle East conflict, too. When Egypt concluded a peace deal with Israel in 1979, it removed the largest and most militarily advanced Arab state from the conflict and cemented Israel's already evident battlefield superiority.

Even before the peace deal, Sadat had revoked Soviet access to Egyptian ports.[213] Moscow was forced to turn to Syria, but the Syrian port facilities were less useful than those in Egypt and Assad proved a stubborn and frustrating partner. The Syrian president was well aware that the Soviet Union needed him if it was to remain relevant in Arab-Israeli Cold War politics, and he kept pocketing Soviet support while offering little in return.[214] It was not until 1980, in the midst of a war in Lebanon and civil strife at home, that Assad finally caved to Soviet demands for a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation. It took several more years for him to agree to let the Soviet Union upgrade its port facilities in Tartous to an official naval logistics base – and by that time the Cold War was nearly over.[215]

The 5th Mediterranean Squadron was dissolved in 1992 as a direct consequence of the end of the Soviet Union, which also ended the Cold War.

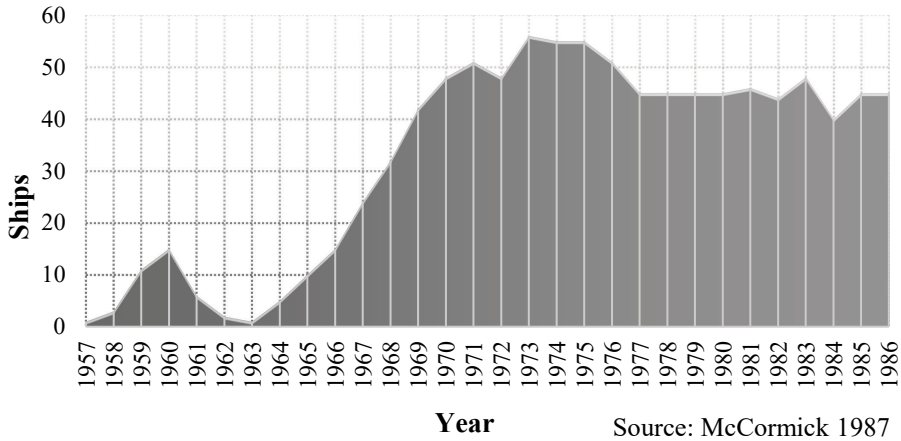
Over its quarter-century-long existence, the 5th Mediterranean Squadron had undergone major changes. When formed in the late 1960s, its envisioned composition had been some 22–38 vessels of different types, classes, and sizes.[216] This included 1–2 cruisers or command ships; a submarine brigade of 8–12 submarines, including 1–2 with nuclear propulsion; an anti-submarine warfare brigade of 8–11 ships, including destroyers or frigates and a few oceangoing minesweepers; an auxiliary ship division of 4–7 vessels, typically floating workshops, submarine tenders, rescue tugs, oilers etc.; 1–2 intelligence ships; and, at times, a landing ship unit with 2–4 large or medium landing ships.[217]

Although this ship configuration initially served as a baseline for the Soviet naval posture, the task force soon rose to a force consisting of 45–55 ships at a daily average, as shown on Figure 9. This persistent high number of ships is partly reflected by the necessity to keep a large number of auxiliary ships in the 5th Mediterranean Squadron, especially once Soviet forces were expelled from Egypt. Even with Tartous upgraded to a naval logistics base in 1984, the Syrian port was not nearly adequate to sustain the 5th Mediterranean Squadron's operations.

[212] Vasiliev 2020, pp. 95-107; Lund 2019a, p. 6.
[213] Vasiliev 2020, p. 105.
[214] Lund 2019b, pp. 6-9.
[215] Lund 2019b, pp. 10-11.
[216] *Ibid.*
[217] Koryakovtsev & Tashlykov 2017.

Consequently, in the 1980s, auxiliary vessels usually amounted to nearly half the force.[218]

Figure 9. Soviet naval vessels in the Mediterranean 1967–87, daily average



Source: McCormick 1987

The average daily strength, as shown in Figure 9, does not, however, reflect the substantial seasonal variation in strength, nor that the force was typically strengthened during both major and minor crises in the Mediterranean region. For example, major force surges took place during the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1970 Black September crisis in Jordan, the 1973 Yom Kippur/October War, and after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.[219] According to a former commander of the 5th Mediterranean Squadron, in the mid-1980s the strength of the squadron occasionally amounted to some 70–80 vessels.[220]

Despite these force surges and the periodical concentration of Soviet naval forces, the main and enduring task of the 5th Mediterranean Squadron was to track the activities of the US Sixth Fleet, which normally operated one or two carrier groups in the Mediterranean. The usual modus operandi of the 5th Mediterranean Squadron was thus to operate in small ship groups dispersed over large areas, with auxiliary vessels lingering in central parts, such as off the coast of Libya.[221]

By and large, the ships of the 5th Mediterranean Squadron were drawn from the Black Sea Fleet, which had already come to play a key role for Soviet naval operations in the Mediterranean Sea in the late 1950s and was in charge of the squadron after 1967. The exception was submarines, whose transit through the Turkish Straits was restricted by the Montreux Convention (see 2.4.1). To solve

[218] *Voennoe obozrenie* 2016.
[219] McCormick 1987, p. 3.
[220] *Voennoe obozrenie* 2016.
[221] *Ibid*.

this problem, entire Northern Fleet submarine brigades were regularly dispatched to the Mediterranean.[222]

3.2 Post-Soviet Decline, 1992–2013

After the end of the Soviet Union, the navy withdrew from the Mediterranean Sea and the 5th Mediterranean Squadron was disbanded. It was no longer feasible to sustain even a reduced naval presence in the Mediterranean, due to the dramatic economic decline of the 1990s and a protracted argument between Ukraine and Russia over how to divide the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet.

Given that the Soviet Black Sea Fleet had been responsible for both its own area of operation and for most of the surface ships of the 5th Mediterranean Squadron, it had controlled a very large number of vessels. In the final years of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea Fleet inventory had consisted of 833 vessels, including eight cruisers or destroyers and about 40 frigates or corvettes.[223] From 1992 to 1997, newly independent Ukraine and Russia would argue over the spoils. It was not until 1997 that a settlement was reached; Russia ended up with approximately 80 per cent of the vessels and permission to lease a Russian naval base in Crimea.[224]

Even after the Russian-Ukrainian dispute was resolved, the operations of the Russian Black Sea Fleet continued to be severely restricted due to the economic hardships of the Russian state. In the absence of resources to operate, sustain, and renew the fleet, former Soviet ships continued to decay into the 2000s. Indeed, it is indicative of the more than twenty years of utter neglect suffered by the Black Sea Fleet that only a single new combat vessel, an oceangoing minesweeper, was commissioned between 1991 and 2014.[225]

Plans to reform and modernise the Russian Armed Forces were attempted on several occasions during the ’90s and ’00s, but with limited success. Only in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 did sufficient political will accrue to reverse the military’s two-decade decline and commence a modernisation programme. Substantial renewal of the ship inventory would remain several years into the future, but the navy almost immediately benefitted from increased resources.

In the Mediterranean Sea, an increased Russian naval presence that had begun a few years prior to the reform was further strengthened. In the second half of the ’00s, Russia had gradually begun to ramp up its naval presence in the Mediterranean. Repair work at the Russian naval logistics base in Syria’s Tartous

[222] *Ibid.*
[223] *Interfax* 2017.
[224] Felgenhauer 1999.
[225] Gorenburg 2018.

commenced in 2006, and was followed by dredging in 2007 and additional infrastructural works in 2009–10.[226] In early 2007, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, made its first of five Mediterranean deployments in less than a decade.[227] In 2008, the first Russian naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea took place, with the participation of vessels from three Russian fleets, including the world's largest non-carrier warship, the cruiser, *Piotr Velikii*.

When Russia commenced anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden in 2009, the number of Mediterranean transits by Northern and Baltic Fleet surface ships increased. In 2009, Russia had also explored the prospect of establishing additional naval support bases, similar to the naval logistics base in Tartous, in the Mediterranean and Middle East region.[228]

Ultimately, however, what really spurred Russian naval activity in the region was the breakout of civil war in Syria in 2011. From the very beginning, Russia supported the war effort of President Bashar al-Assad's regime with shipments of ammunition and military hardware. As is further explored in Section 3.3, the maritime and naval aspects of this support would soon evolve into the foundations of a re-established permanent Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean.

3.3 The Russian Mediterranean Task Force

In September 2013, after a 21-year hiatus, Russia formally re-established its permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea through the creation of a *Standing Operative Task Force of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea.* Similar to its Cold War predecessor, it was operationally subordinated to the Black Sea Fleet. We henceforth refer to as it the Mediterranean Task Force.[229]

As with the 1967–92 Soviet 5th Mediterranean Squadron, the Mediterranean Task Force is not a unit with a fixed inventory of ships. Rather, the September 2013 decision meant that the Russian Navy committed, from that point on, to sustaining a Mediterranean naval force under a single command, comprised of at least ten naval vessels at any given time, with the participation of ships from all five Russian major naval formations: the Baltic Fleet, the Northern Fleet, the Pacific Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, and the Caspian Sea Flotilla.

There are several indications that the groundwork for the new unit had already been laid in late 2012. For example, a large naval exercise of more than twenty vessels from three fleets, led by the soon-to-be commander of the task force, took

[226] Lund 2019b, p. 16.
[227] TASS 2018d.
[228] Azar & Artiomiev 2009.
[229] Ru. *Postoiannoe operativnoe soedinenie voenno-morskogo flota v Sredizemnom More*.

place in the eastern Mediterranean in January 2013.[230] A command staff, subordinated to the Black Sea Fleet, was in place by March 2013.[231] Finally, the Mediterranean Task Force was formally activated on 21 September 2013.[232]

3.3.1 The Arab Spring as a Catalyst

There is no obvious single reason for Russia's decision to re-establish a permanent unit in the Mediterranean. Rather, it appears to have been motivated by a combination of domestic processes, including Russia's overall military re-armament, its turn to a more assertive, confrontational, and anti-American foreign policy stance, and its intensified quest for great-power status; and developments in the Mediterranean theatre, such as the discovery of natural gas assets and, in particular, new risks and opportunities associated with the 2011 Arab Spring.

The 1970s and 1980s are generally perceived in Russia as a period when the Soviet Navy successfully pursued Moscow's interests in the region, while counterbalancing the world's leading sea power, the United States. Given the importance that modern-day Russia attaches to the restoration of its global influence and great-power status, one should not underestimate the emotional and symbolic value of reinstating a Soviet-style permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean. Nor will Russian planners have been unaware of the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern region's importance to international security, including US interventions and Islamist terrorism; rising maritime trade flows; China's plans for economic expansion; and, from around 2010, European-Russian gas politics. However, none of these factors can adequately explain why the Mediterranean Task Force was established specifically in 2013.

As noted earlier, Russia had already started to ramp up its Mediterranean naval activity in 2006–7, more than six years prior to the formation of the Task Force. In this period, increased funding, in part due to rising oil prices, made it possible for the Navy to increase its operations. For example, in 2008 for the first time since Soviet times, a rendezvous with ships from three Russian fleets took place in the Mediterranean Sea.[233] However, the military's comprehensive reform and modernisation program was only launched in 2008–9, after the Russo-Georgian War and, by the time Russia had laid the groundwork for the Task Force, it had not yet resulted in new ships and capabilities.

In other words, the Mediterranean Task Force's formation in 2013 was neither the result of a sudden return to the Mediterranean theatre, nor of improved capabilities for sustaining naval operations in the region. Rather, Russia's more active naval

[230] *Voennyi Sovet* 2013.
[231] Russian Ministry of Defence 2013.
[232] Koryakovtsev & Tashlykov 2017.
[233] *RIA Novosti* 2008.

posture in the Mediterranean is best explained by the events that followed the 2011 Arab Spring, particularly as relates to the wars in Libya and Syria.

In March 2011, Russia refrained from vetoing UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which empowered members of the UN to "take all necessary measures" to "protect civilians" in Libya. In the following months, the United States and its European and Arab partners used this ambiguous formulation to wage an air war on Moammar al-Gaddafi's government, deposing and ultimately killing him. Russia quickly soured on the war and began to protest the actions of the Western-Arab coalition.[234] The crisis stirred up internal turmoil in the Russian political leadership, and Russia has since engaged in greater regional adventurism and a more assertive foreign policy.[235]

Moscow had long been suspicious of US-led plans for "regime change" and interventions in support of domestic uprisings, but the Libyan experience led to a dramatic hardening of that stance once a parallel conflict began to unfold in Syria, where Russia had significant interests.[236] Russia offered resolute diplomatic support for President Bashar al-Assad's government and began to deliver arms and equipment to his forces, although many such early deliveries appeared to be in fulfillment of existing pre-crisis contracts.[237]

Russia's support for the Syrian government's war effort led directly to increased naval activity in the eastern Mediterranean in mid-2012. Civilian freight vessels transporting military equipment to Syria were obstructed at least twice during the first half of 2012. To forestall continued interference, transport duties to Syria were taken over by Russian Navy landing ships, which, from mid-2012, would shuttle back and forth between the Russian Black Sea port of Novorissiysk and Tartous in Syria. The operation was unofficially nicknamed the "Syrian Express."[238]

In sum, then, several factors helped catalyse Russia's decision to bolster its naval strength in the Mediterranean, but Moscow's irritation with the intervention in Libya and its support for the Assad regime in Syria were particularly important triggers.

3.3.2 Four Phases of Russia's Naval Presence, 2013–21

September 2021 marked eight years since the creation of the Mediterranean Task Force and the re-establishment of Russia's permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean. During this time, the unit's composition and tasks have evolved,

[234] Lund 2019b, pp. 18–20.
[235] See for example Ishetiar 2019.
[236] Dannreuther 2015, pp. 83–4.
[237] Lund 2018, pp. 45-7; Lund 2019b, pp. 20-2.
[238] Kramnik 2015.

both due to a gradually improved capability to sustain a permanent presence and due to geopolitical changes in the region.

The evolution of the Mediterranean Task Force may be subdivided into four successive stages. The first stage is represented by the period from its formation until Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, that is, between September 2013 and September 2015. The ensuing active phase of Russian intervention, between September 2015 and December 2017, forms the second stage. The third stage is represented by the period after the most active phase of Russian aerial operations, from January 2018 onward, during which Russia managed and consolidated its Syrian and naval activities. Lastly, starting around 2020, a fourth phase may be discerned, in which Russia's newly-developed Mediterranean naval posture and its vastly improved foothold in Syria have begun to be utilised beyond the Mediterranean theatre.

Permanence Restored, 2013–15

The establishment of the Mediterranean Task Force in 2013 was an important symbolic step, but it did not immediately change the composition of Russia's naval presence in the Mediterranean. The main significance of the creation of the Task Force was, rather, the insertion of a command level specific to naval operations in the Mediterranean Sea. Structured as temporary tactical groups under a single Mediterranean command, individual ships and groups of ships were also allocated to the Mediterranean theatre for longer periods of time. Operating a few weeks within the Mediterranean Task Force soon became an ordinary part of the standard out-of-area mission for Russian naval ship groups, especially in combination with anti-piracy tasks in the Gulf of Aden. Thus, with the exception of landing ships that partook in the Syrian Express military supply line, ship groups operating within the Mediterranean Task Force during this first phase were not specifically customised for Mediterranean operations.

The initial summer 2013 version of the Mediterranean Task Force consisted of four tactical groups, totalling 16 vessels, including nine warships and seven auxiliary vessels.[239] Two novelties during this first phase were the permanent stationing of an *Amur*-class floating workshop in Tartous, from early 2014, and, later that same year, the continuous operation of *Vishnya*- or *Moma*-class intelligence ships in the Mediterranean, rotated in from the Black Sea and Baltic Fleets.

Before 2014, Russia had on several occasions participated in bi- and multilateral naval exercises with NATO countries, in the Mediterranean. Examples include the NATO anti-terrorist exercise *Active Endeavour*, in 2006, and the annual bilateral Russian-Italian naval IONIEX exercises in the Ionian Sea, in 2010–13. Following

[239] *Sdelanounas* 2013.

the annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, virtually all NATO-Russia cooperation was terminated, which reduced the number of international exercises available to the Russian Navy. To resume bilateral naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea was likely of symbolic value to Russia. Two such exercises were staged in mid-2015, first with China and then with Egypt.[240]

Intervening in Syria, 2015–17

On 30 September 2015, Russia launched an aerial intervention in Syria, characterised by "remarkable speed and sophisticated planning."[241] Although the intervention mainly relied on a new Russian air base at Hmeymim, near Latakia, maritime operations also played an important role. As a result of operations in Syria, the Mediterranean Task Force's operations became even more concentrated to the eastern Mediterranean, and its mission and composition were adjusted in several ways:

- The Syrian Express supply line was strengthened in order to sustain Russian operations in Syria.
- Ships were now often dispatched to the region specifically to support the Hmeymim base and, to a lesser degree, to participate in combat operations.
- Due to the increased naval activity and infrastructural improvements at the Tartous base, new capabilities were gradually added to the Mediterranean Task Force itself.

Leading up to September 2015, transports to Syria increased in intensity. Until then, the Syrian Express had managed to make a significant contribution to Assad's war effort, despite the limited freight capacity of Russian military landing ships; *Ropucha*-class landing ships can carry approximately 500 tonnes of cargo, while the *Alligator*-class carries 1000 tonnes. Although this capacity had sufficed so far, it was not nearly enough to sustain Russia's own operations as well. Russia therefore bought four civilian freight ships, which began to ply the route between Russia's Black Sea ports and Syria in late 2015 and early 2016.[242] All four ships were given naval ensigns and subordinated to the Black Sea Fleet, so as to minimise the risk of transports being interdicted on their way to Syria. By increasing the total freight capacity by more than 20,000 tonnes, the four freight vessels

[240] *TASS* 2015.
[241] McDermott 2015.
[242] The four ships were built in in the 1980s and 1990s, displacing 2,500–6,500 tonnes. *Reuters* 2015.

contributed a substantial part of the altogether 950,000 tonnes of military goods transported to sustain the Russian military operation until December 2017.[243]

The Russian Navy also began to engage directly in combat operations, most likely in part for demonstrative effect. Four missile ships launched cruise missiles on targets in Syria from the Caspian Sea at the outset of the intervention in September 2015, while the first cruise missile strike from the Mediterranean Sea was carried out in December of the same year, from a *Kilo*-class submarine. It was followed by several cruise missile attacks from the Mediterranean Sea throughout 2016–17, using *Kilo*-class submarines, *Grad Sviiazhsk*-class small missile ships, and *Grigorovich*-class frigates. [244] Russia's sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, operated in the eastern Mediterranean from November 2016 until January 2017, conducting approximately 420 sorties with carrier-based MiG-29K and Su-33 aircraft.[245] Warships were not only dispatched on combat missions, however. During the first ten months of Russian operations, the rotation of ships ensured that a *Slava*-class missile cruiser would continuously linger in the waters off the coast of Syria.[246] With their shipborne S-300F naval air defence systems, the cruisers provided protection to the Russian contingent in the sensitive build-up phase.

Russia also started to assign new types of capabilities to the Mediterranean Task Force. Minesweeping and anti-diversion capabilities were added to improve the monitoring and overall protection of the Syrian coastal zone. From the first half of 2016, *Natya*-class seagoing minesweepers from the Black Sea Fleet have, on a rotational basis, been part of the Task Force. In May 2016, two *Raptor*-class fast assault craft were brought down to Syria, and *Grachonok*-class anti-diversion boats have been part of the Task Force since early 2017. At the time, Russia likely envisioned an expansion of the Tartous naval logistics base, and adding these capabilities would both enable better protection of the base from threats emanating from the sea and ensure safe entry and exit.

Another major change in the composition of the Mediterranean Task Force was the permanent basing of attack submarines at Tartous. *Kilo*-class submarines had been dispatched to the Mediterranean Sea for short periods since late 2015, but in mid–2017 this pattern changed. Instead of joining the Black Sea Fleet submarine brigade after completion, the last two newly built *Kilo*-class were directly deployed to the Mediterranean and incorporated into the Mediterranean Task

[243] Bulgakov 2018, p. 32; *RIA Novosti* 2017.
[244] *TASS* 2017.
[245] To allow for passage through the Turkish Straits under the Montreux Convention, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* is formally labelled a "heavy aircraft-carrying cruiser."; *TASS* 2018b.
[246] The *Slava*-class cruiser, *Moskva*, the Black Sea Fleet's flagship, was dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean from September 2015 until January 2016, and then replaced by the *Variiag*, from the Pacific Fleet, which left the area in June 2016.

Force.[247] Ever since, the Mediterranean Task Force has, more or less uninterruptedly, operated two modern *Kilo*-class submarines in the eastern Mediterranean. This allows for covertly tracking other nations warships, which is why it probably is the current number one concern for NATO naval operations in the eastern Mediterranean.[248] The deployment of *Kilo*-class submarines also allow for unexpected strikes on land targets, using *Kalibr* cruise missiles.

Figure 10. Typical Mediterranean Task Force composition, 2016–17

Type	Class	Number of ships
Surface combatant	*Kashin, Grigorovich, Krivak, Grad Sviiazhsk*	2–5
Conventional attack	*Kilo*	2
Landing ships	*Alligator, Ropucha*	2–3
Patrol boats (anti-diversion)	*Raptor, BK-16*	2
Anti-diversion boat	*Grachionok*	1
Seagoing minesweeper	*Natya*	1
Anti-diversion boat	*Grachonok*	1
Mooring-buoy tender	*Kashtan*	1
Floating workshop	*Amur*	1
Signals intelligence ship	*Moma, Vishnya*	1
		Total 14–18

Consolidation, 2018–20

During a visit to the Hmeymim Air Base on 11 December 2017, President Putin declared the end of Russia's military operations in Syria.[249]

During the year, US-backed Kurdish-led forces and Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian army forces had, separately but in parallel, recovered nearly all of the territory held by the so-called Islamic State. Several insurgent enclaves still held out against Assad's forces, and Turkish and US troops based among anti-government forces along Syria's borders prevented these areas from being recaptured. Even so, Russia and Iran had succeeded in decisively turning the war around, notably by retaking the rebel stronghold in eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and by subsequently coercing Turkey, a key backer of the insurgency, into trilateral conflict-management talks. A full victory remained elusive, but Assad's government no longer appeared to face any immediate existential threats.[250]

As would become evident, however, Putin's declaration did not mean that Russia was withdrawing from Syria. Rather, it signalled the end of a particular phase of Russia's intervention, and it appears to have been publicised for political effect. A

[247] Russian Ministry of Defence 2017.
[248] IISS 2020.
[249] *RIA Novosti* 2017.
[250] Lund 2018.

similar declaration had been made in March 2016, with a similar outcome: the number of Russian aircraft in Syria decreased, but the Hmeymim Air Base remained active and military operations did by no means end. In fact, Russia had decided to stay in Syria for the long term. The Syrian government had agreed to allow the expansion, and 49-year leases, of both the naval logistics base in Tartous and the air base at Hmeymim, in January 2017.[251] In June 2018, after helping Assad mop up a number of smaller rebel enclaves, Putin stated that Russian troops would remain in Syria "as long as it benefits Russia and in pursuance of our international commitments."[252]

The period from the end of 2017 to mid-2018 nevertheless marked a shift. Russia's role in Syria has since been mainly about the management of lower-level conflict, with periodic surges when necessary to confront crises or attain specific objectives. As it was less engaged in continuous combat operations, Russia refocused on its long-term aims.

Moscow's military posture in the eastern Mediterranean had by now been considerably strengthened. As noted earlier, the composition of the Mediterranean Task Force had also started to change with the permanent addition of mine-sweeping and anti-diversion vessels dispatched from the Black Sea Fleet. These are capabilities normally found in the OVR ("water area protection") brigades of Russian naval bases, the primary purpose of which is to ensure safe operations in the harbour areas and adjoining waters.[253] It was a sign of the fact that Russia had begun to operate its old logistical base more in the manner of a full-fledged naval base, but also of an increased ambition to safeguard the Syrian coast and the ports of Latakia, Baniyas, and Tartous.[254]

In this period, several infrastructure projects were initiated to further strengthen the two Russian bases on Syrian soil. By 2019–20, new naval service and repair facilities were under construction in Tartous, which, once finished, would facilitate naval operations in the region in at least three ways.[255] First, they would eliminate the need to constantly keep an *Amur*-class floating workshop in Tartous, thereby freeing up mooring berths in the harbour. Second, an expanded capacity to handle minor repairs locally would reduce the need for time-consuming trips to the Black Sea. Third, improved stationary facilities for technical support would likely be particularly beneficial to Russian submarine operations in the Mediterranean, given that the Montreux Convention restricts the transfer of submarines through the Turkish Straits (see 2.4.1). In September 2021, the Black Sea Fleet *Amur*-class

[251] Lund 2018, p. 27; Dredging and improvement of the naval logistics base had already commenced earlier; Naval Agreement 2017.
[252] President of Russia 2018.
[253] OVR (*okhrana vodnogo raiona*), translated, is 'water area protection,' and OVR brigades normally encompass anti-submarine, minesweeping, and anti-diversion capabilities.
[254] *Flag Rodiny* 2021a, p. 4.
[255] Navy-korabl Livejournal 2020.

floating workshop, *PM-158*, left Tartous without a replacement, meaning that the new facilities had likely become operational.[256]

Similarly, runway improvements at the Hmeymim Air Base have, since May 2021, allowed additional types of Russian aircraft to operate from Syria, including MiG-31K interceptors and Tu-22M3 supersonic heavy bombers.[257] A temporary deployment of Il-38 anti-submarine aircraft to Hmeymim was carried out already in 2018 (see below), but will probably become more common due to improved facilities. The deployment of naval strike (Tu-22M3) and maritime patrol capabilities (Il-38) adds substantially to the overall capability of the Russian Mediterranean naval grouping.

The thorough modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet ship inventory, which had begun to show results in 2014–15, also began to affect the Mediterranean Task Force during this time. Newly commissioned surface combatants and submarines armed with the *Kalibr* land-attack cruise missile system were often assigned to the Mediterranean Sea shortly after commissioning. Smaller vessels with modest seaworthiness and range were exclusively assigned from the Black Sea Fleet.

In a May 2018 speech, Putin stated that *Kalibr*-armed warships should be present within the Mediterranean Task Force at all times.[258] The speech was noteworthy as one of very few official statements on the composition of the Mediterranean Task Force, but it did not, in fact, signal any major changes in its composition. Warships armed with *Kalibr* cruise missiles had almost continuously been part of the Mediterranean Task Force since the beginning of 2016.

In September 2018, Russia carried out a large joint Navy and Aerospace Forces exercise, labelled *Okeanskii Shchit*-2018 (Ocean Shield-2018), in the eastern Mediterranean. Altogether 36 aircraft, including Su-30SM multirole fighters, Su-33 air-superiority fighters, Il-38 and Tu-142 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, and Tu-160 strategic bombers, from both the Aerospace Forces and the Navy's naval aviation participated. According to Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, 28 naval vessels participated, which corresponds to assessments based on Bosporus ship-spotting information and media reports.[259] This included 17 surface combatants or submarines, five seagoing auxiliary ships, two signal intelligence vessels, and four smaller patrol boats (see Figure 11).

Ocean Shield-2018 was the largest Russian force surge in the Mediterranean Sea since the Soviet era, but still far from the 1970–80s, when the Soviet 5th Mediterranean Squadron could at times reach almost three times this size. Moreover, the concentration of so many ships in the eastern Mediterranean was accomplished by scheduling the exercise for a brief period of overlapping presence, when

[256] Russian Ministry of Defence 2021.
[257] CAST 2021.
[258] *Interfax* 2018.
[259] *TASS* 2018a.

vessels heading out had not yet departed but new vessels had arrived to fill their place in the Task Force. In addition, some of the participating small missile ships had been sent from the Caspian Flotilla. In other words, the ability to surge forces for a pre-planned exercise such as *Ocean Shield*-2018 is a very different thing from responding to a sudden crisis. Nevertheless, the Russian Navy was in a significantly better position to pull off this type of exercise following the improvements to its infrastructure in Syria and the determined modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet.

Figure 11. Ocean Shield-2018, 1–8 September 2018

Type	Class	Number of Ships
Combat ships/crafts		
Cruiser	*Slava*	1
Destroyer	*Udaloy*	1
Frigates/Guards ships	*Grigorovich, Krivak,*	5
Landing ships	*Alligator, Ropucha*	3
Small missile ships	*Grad Sviiazhsk*	3
Conventional attack	*Kilo*	2
Seagoing minesweeper	*Natya*	2
Anti-diversion boat	*Grachonok*	2
Patrol boats (anti-diversion)	*Raptor, BK-16*	2
Special-purpose vessels		
Signals intelligence ship	*Moma, Yurii Ivanov*	2
Auxiliary ships		
Tanker	*Boris Chilkin*	1
Mooring-buoy tender	*Kashtan*	1
Floating workshop	*Amur*	1
Seagoing rescue tug	*Sliva, project 22870*	2
		Total 28

The Russian Intervention in Libya

In the 2018–20 period, Russia also stepped up its involvement in the Libyan civil war, where it had been working alongside the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to support the forces of Khalifa Haftar, headquartered in the east-Libyan cities of Benghazi and Tobruk.[260] The EU and most European nations, but not France, Greece, or Cyprus, favoured a rival, UN-endorsed Libyan government in Tripoli, which was aligned with the Turkish-Qatari camp in Middle Eastern politics.

By mid-2018, mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor believed to be linked to Russian intelligence services, began to provide specialised support for Haftar's forces.[261] A year later, Wagner fighters started to

[260] Wehrey 2020, pp. 21–2.
[261] On Wagner activities in Libya, see UN S/2021/229, pp. 428–66.

deploy in direct combat roles in support of an Emirati-backed Haftar offensive; Abu Dhabi may in fact have funded the Wagner operations. Libya expert Frederic Wehrey notes that the Russian mercenary intervention, "while hardly an exemplar of expeditionary warfare, was enough to make a difference in the context of Libya's rudimentary militia fighting."[262]

In late 2019, as Haftar's forces closed in on Tripoli, Turkey suddenly out-escalated the Russia-backed camp by launching a direct military intervention, after securing Tripoli's acceptance of Turkish maritime boundary claims (see 2.4.1). The Turkish intervention, which used drone warfare and Syrian mercenaries to great effect, stopped Haftar's offensive and turned the war around, allowing the pro-Tripoli forces to press eastward.

To avoid direct clashes, the Russian fighters redeployed to a defensive line between Sirte and the Jufra Air Base, in central Libya. Simultaneously, in May 2020, Su-24 and MiG-29 jets with scrubbed-off national markings were moved to Jufra from Russia, via Iran and Hmeymim.[263] Egypt then drew a line in the sand, referred to by President Sisi as a "red line," by threatening to launch a ground invasion if the Turkey-backed camp were to attack the Sirte-Jufra axis[264] In the face of this Russian-Egyptian threat of escalation, Turkey and its Libyan allies relented. The fighting died down, and, after a period of quiet negotiations, a cease-fire was adopted on 23 October. By spring 2021, UN-led peace talks produced a new Tripoli-based unity government blessed by both Russia and Turkey, which has failed, however, to impose itself on Haftar and his allies in Tobruk.[265] The situation remained unstable at year's end.

Moscow and Ankara had thus once again found themselves backing rival actors in a civil war. Like in Syria, they sought to make the most of the situation by negotiating pragmatically even as their Libyan clients fought, recognising each other as stakeholders and primary power brokers in a multisided conflict.

Russia's involvement in Libya appears to be motivated by several factors, including commercial and strategic interests as well as a more general desire to score easy points in a power vacuum. Although during the Cold War the Soviet Union unsuccessfully tried to win Gaddafi's approval for a naval base in Libya, Russia may see less need for this today, given that the Russian Navy now has a well-established facility in Tartous. Moreover, such a base would presumably be located in the Haftar-controlled Benghazi-Tobruk area instead of in the Tripoli region; the latter would be more useful if seeking to project power into the western

[262] Wehrey 2020, pp. 28–9.
[263] Iddon 2021.
[264] *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2020.
[265] Harchaoui 2021.

Mediterranean. In 2020, a Russian diplomat denied that his country was seeking a new military or naval base in Libya.[266]

To date, the Mediterranean Task Force appears to have played no direct role in Russia's pro-Haftar intervention. Should fighting resume, however, it is possible that Russian naval assets could be deployed in support of the mission. Egypt is ensuring that the Haftar camp can receive foreign support through a safe overland route, but Turkey's maritime supply line to western Libya is potentially exposed to naval interception, especially as the UN Security Council authorises member states to inspect ships suspected of violating the Libyan arms embargo (see 2.4.1).[267] Russia's warships could potentially also assist its Libyan partners by forwarding surveillance and intelligence data, extending air defences to coastal areas, or even by providing fire support.

After 2020: Utilisation and Expansion

Russia's intervention in Libya has yet to produce tangible benefits or economic payoffs, but its influence over this strategically located, oil-rich country has grown significantly. Libyan and regional actors now appear to view Moscow as one of the conflict's primary powerbrokers. Given that Russia's involvement in Libya has been limited to a semi-clandestine, low-cost, and low-risk intervention through private contractors, regional partners, and Libyan proxies, it must by all measures be considered a cost-effective policy.

In Syria, the stakes are higher, but Russia enjoys a relatively comfortable position. Russian air operations in support of the Assad regime continue sporadically. When needed, Russia can launch major surges to strengthen Assad's hand, such as during a period of particularly intense fighting in the Idlib region in the winter of 2019–20. Following yet another agreement between Erdoğan and Putin on 5 March 2020, the conflict fell back into its semi-frozen state, with only limited clashes alongside slow-moving diplomacy. As long as the Assad regime remains intact and Russia can successfully manage relations and military deconfliction routines with Turkey, the United States, and Israel, Moscow does not appear to face any major risks in Syria. Although the Assad government will require long-term support, Russia appears to have avoided more severe forms of "mission creep." Notably, Moscow has made no attempt to bail out Assad economically, even though it does offer certain economic and logistical services that would otherwise be unavailable to Syria's heavily sanctioned economy.[268]

In late 2020 and early 2021, Russia began to deploy its new naval assets to ensure the safety of Syrian oil supplies, thereby fulfilling an urgent need of the Damascus

[266] *Sputnik News Arabic* 2020.
[267] Kirechu 2021.
[268] Lund 2019b, pp. 42-4.

government and seizing an opportunity to further expand its relationship with one of the Middle East/Central Asia region's key powers, Iran.

Since at least May 2019, Israel's Flotilla 13 marine commando unit has been striking Iranian oil tankers and cargo vessels (said to be carrying arms) in the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The attacks, which used limpet mines and missiles, typically sought to damage and incapacitate ships rather than to sink them. They appear to have been part of a strategy to pressure both Syria and Iran by reinforcing the effect of US oil sanctions on both countries. According to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, "several dozen attacks were carried out, which caused the Iranians cumulative damage of billions of dollars."[269] Syria has suffered a very severe fuel shortage in recent years, for which Syrian authorities blame the Israeli attacks and US and EU sanctions.[270]

When the pace of Israeli attacks increased, Iran and Russia stepped in to protect Syria-bound shipping. In late 2020, the Russian Navy conducted an exercise off the Syrian coast to practice methods of ensuring the "smooth passage of civilian ships." Simultaneously, evidence emerged that the *Udaloy*-class destroyer, *Vice-Admiral Kulakov*, had been escorting an Iranian oil tanker headed for Syria.[271] According to press reports, a system emerged whereby Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps naval units would escort Iranian ships through the Red Sea to Suez; the Russian Mediterranean Task Force would then step in at Port Said to oversee the final stretch of travel to Syrian territorial waters.[272] In April 2021, Russian state media indicated that the three nations had established a joint operations room, with Russia undertaking to convoy groups of Iranian tankers to Syria through 2021, at least.[273]

In conjunction with the creation of the escort mechanism, Iran reportedly began to retaliate directly against Israeli shipping in February 2021, premiering with a limpet mine attack on an Israeli-owned vehicle carrier, the *Helios Ray*, as it passed the Gulf of Oman.[274] By August 2021, an investigation by the London daily, *The Telegraph*, found that at least twenty civilian ships had been attacked thus far, with the first fatalities suffered in August 2021, when Iranian-piloted kamikaze drones killed two people on the *Mercer Street*, an Israeli-owned tanker in the Persian Gulf.[275] There were no suggestions that Russia played a role in these attacks.

The Russian escort missions have likely contributed to growing hesitation in Israel about the usefulness of the maritime sabotage strategy. By May 2021, voices

[269] Harel 2021b.
[270] *Al-Mijhar* 2021.
[271] Sutton 2020.
[272] Kingsley *et al.* 2021.
[273] *Sputnik News Arabic* 2021a.
[274] Lubold *et al.* 2021; Kingsley *et al.* 2021.
[275] Rothwell 2021.

within the Israeli security establishment warned that it was unwise to seek conflict in the maritime sphere, where Israel enjoys no clear advantage over Iran.[276]

3.4 Future Prospects of the Mediterranean Task Force

Russia's ability to maintain or further strengthen the Mediterranean Task Force is determined by several factors.

One is the general availability of naval vessels suitable for operations in regions where Russia lacks natural access. Generally, the ongoing modernisation of the Russian Navy, and especially its blue-water capabilities, will likely result in a gradual increase in the capability to dispatch ship groups, not only from the Black Sea Fleet, but also the from the Northern, Baltic, and Pacific Fleets.[277]

Another is the capacity for Russia to support its warships in out-of-area operations. In order to sustain enduring operations in the Mediterranean region, Russia needs access to sufficient and reliable logistical support. In 2021, the situation is largely satisfactory. The recent expansion and upgrade of the Tartous base has provided Russia an unprecedented naval foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, and bilateral arrangements with states in the region facilitate Russian warship port calls. To date, Russia's predominantly Soviet-built auxiliary fleet of oilers and oceangoing rescue tugs has been sufficient to support its rather modest deployments.

Apart from the general outlook of Russia's ongoing naval modernisation and ambitions on the high seas, however, the single most important factor governing the size, shape, and mission of the Mediterranean Task Force is the future evolution of the Black Sea Fleet.

3.4.1 The Modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet

As in Soviet times, the Black Sea Fleet remains key to sustaining Russia's presence in the eastern Mediterranean, but the deterioration of its ship inventory during the '90s and '00s long prevented enduring operations. It is only in recent years that the Black Sea Fleet has begun to grow, through the addition of new and modern ships.

The partitioning of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet between Russia and Ukraine was finalised in 1997 (see 3.2). As part of the agreement, Russia leased the Sevastopol Naval Base and other infrastructure on the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. Although the lease agreement was extended in 2010, the arrangement effectively

[276] Melman 2021a; Kubovich 2021; Melman 2021b.

[277] In comparison with 2019, the Russian blue-water capacity, i.e., the availability of submarine and surface combatants with a displacement over 2000 tons, will increase by almost 50 per cent by 2027. See Kjellén 2020.

constrained the modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet, as alterations in ship inventory had to be discussed with Ukraine. In 2005, therefore, Russia initiated a federal programme to reduce the Black Sea Fleet's dependence on Sevastopol by improving alternative maritime infrastructure on the Russian Black Sea coast, especially in the port of Novorossiysk.[278]

In 2014, however, Russia's forcible annexation of Crimea completely altered the situation. Federal funds had already resulted in a major improvement of the military harbour in Novorossiysk, but were now reallocated to infrastructure projects in Crimea.[279] As a result of the 2014 events, the Black Sea Fleet has since had free access both to the newly improved infrastructure in Novorossiysk and to all of the naval infrastructure in Sevastopol and the rest of Crimea.

A modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet ship inventory had long been planned, but before 2014 it had only made modest progress. In 2010, Russia laid down both the first *Grigorovich*-class frigate and the first *Kilo*-class submarine intended for the Black Sea. After 2014, with a radically improved infrastructure and a dire need to replace practically all types of vessels, the Black Sea Fleet began to commission several new ships. As shown in Figure 12, by the end of 2020 it had acquired 18 new surface ships and submarines, with at least 11 more on the way.

[278] *The federal target programme to improve the Black Sea Fleet infrastructure on Russian territory during the period 2005–20.*
[279] TASS 2014.

Figure 12. Modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet ship inventory

Type	Class	Commissioned (year)	Number of ships[1]
Deliveries 2014–21			
Frigate	*Grigorovich*	2016–17	3[2]
Submarine	*Kilo*	2014–16	6
Small missile ship	*Grad Sviiazhsk*	2015–21	4[3]
Patrol Ship	*Bykov*	2018–20	3
Minesweeper	*Obukhov*	2019	2
			Total 18
Anticipated future deliveries			
Small missile ship	*Uragan*	2021–22	6
Patrol Ship	*Bykov*	2021–23	3
Corvette	*Steregushchii*	2021–23	1–2[4]
Minesweeper	*Obukhov*	2021	1
LHD ship[5]	*Ivan Rogov*[6]	2027–30	1–2
			Total 12–14

Notes: [1] Delivered as of January 2021; [2] Six units ordered initially, three later cancelled; [3] Four remains, as two of the total six ships commissioned were transferred to the Baltic Fleet in 2016; [4] The second corvette not confirmed for the Black Sea Fleet; [5] Landing helicopter dock (amphibious assault ship); [6] Project 23900, not to be confused with the project 1174 landing ship built for the Soviet Navy in the 1970s.
Source: Figure compiled from data published on the Russianships.net homepage.

In addition to the new warships, several special or auxiliary seagoing vessels have also been delivered to the Black Sea Fleet during this period. These include, for example, the medium intelligence ship, *Ivan Khurs* (*Yurii Ivanov*-class); a series of four Project 22870 seagoing rescue tugs, delivered in 2014–19; and the larger Project 23470 oceangoing tug, *Sergei Balk*, which was delivered in 2020. In the coming two or three years, a fifth Project 22870 seagoing rescue tug and a second Project 23470 oceangoing tug will be added to the Black Sea Fleet inventory.

Until recently, the Black Sea Fleet relied heavily on two old, Soviet-built replenishment oilers: the *Boris Chilkin*-class large tanker *Ivan Bubnov*, commissioned in 1975, and the *Olekma*-class medium tanker, *Iman*, commissioned in 1966. The year 2021, however, appears likely to become the turning point in the modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet's organic capability to conduct replenishment at sea. In October 2021, only a month after its commissioning, the new *Mikhail Barskov*-class small tanker, *Vitse-admiral Paromov*, was dispatched to the Mediterranean Task Force. Her sister ship, the *Vasilii Nikitin*, is expected to enter Black Sea Fleet service in 2022. Lastly, the much larger *Elbrus*-class logistics support vessel, *Vsevolod Bobrov*, is expected to join the Black Sea Fleet in late 2021.[280]

[280] *Flag Rodiny* 2021b.

Overall, the renewal of the Black Sea Fleet ship inventory that commenced in 2014 has, in only a few years, dramatically improved the fleet's capability to maintain and sustain the Mediterranean Naval Task Force. As its modernisation is expected to continue towards 2027, the capacity of the Black Sea Fleet to dispatch ships to the Mediterranean Sea will continue to increase incrementally.

3.4.2 Supporting operations South of Suez

After several years of consolidation and expansion, the Mediterranean Task Force and the naval logistical base in Tartous now offer a natural staging area for projecting naval force out of the area. This could include a deepening presence in the western Mediterranean and beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, but Russia's priority is likely to expand activities in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and the wider Indian Ocean region.

Having headed the Mediterranean Task Force from the start, while also supplying most of its ship inventory, the Black Sea Fleet will likely, as noted in Section 3.4.1, play a key role in enabling any expansion south of Suez. In 2017, the then incumbent commander of the Black Sea Fleet predicted that as the modernisation of its ship inventory proceeds, its area of responsibility would also expand to include the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, and possibly parts of the Arabian Sea.[281] To minimise the navy's dependence on Suez Canal transit and remain on a sound logistical footing, Russia will then need infrastructural support south of Suez. That includes easy access to foreign ports, but Russia is also seeking a new naval logistics base.

Already in 2010, Moscow had investigated the possibility of establishing a naval support base on the Yemenite island of Socotra; it never materialised.[282] In recent years, however, Russia has landed agreements to secure naval access to ports in Cyprus (2015) and Egypt (2015), in addition to its expanded basing rights in Syria (2017).[283] Russia has also closed similar agreements with states south of Suez, including Sri Lanka (2014), Mozambique (2018), and Sudan (2019; see below).[284] In addition, Russian naval vessels are regularly granted port access by other states in the area, among them Djibouti, Mauritius, Oman, and Iran (see Map 9).

Russia's search for a suitable Red Sea base has in recent years focused on Sudan and, to a lesser extent, Eritrea.[285] During a visit to Moscow in 2017, Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir floated the idea of Russian basing rights on Sudan's Red Sea coast.[286] Negotiations ensued, but Bashir was overthrown in 2019 and

[281] Vitko, 2017, p. 21.
[282] Lenta 2010.
[283] See for example Naval Agreement 2015; Naval Agreement 2017.
[284] *RIA Novosti* 2018; Naval Agreement 2019.
[285] Solomon 2018.
[286] Abdelwahid 2017; Lund 2019a, p. 40.

succeeded by an unstable transitional regime. In November 2020, the Russian government stated that it had signed a draft agreement to create a naval logistics base in Port Sudan, after handing over a used *Petrushka*-class training boat to the Sudanese Navy, likely to sweeten the deal.[287] However, Sudan refused to ratify the agreement. Officially, the country's new leaders cited legal obstacles during the transitional period; in practice, they appeared to have second thoughts, possibly hoping for better terms or responding to US pressure. Meanwhile, the country suffered chronic instability, and Port Sudan was subjected to a weeks-long tribal blockade that caused foodstuffs and fuel shortages.[288] In October 2021, military leader Abdelfattah al-Burhan purged rival factions. Burhan later told Russian media that he wanted to honour the agreement, but added, ambiguously, that "we still see some issues that need to be resolved."[289]

With the Sudan deal in limbo, the Russian Navy has no dependable support infrastructure south of Suez. Even so, its presence in the Arabian Sea region has been on the increase.

For more than a decade, Russia has focused mainly on two types of naval activity in the region: the bilateral Russian-Indian naval exercises known as *Indra*, which began in 2003, and anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, since 2009.

Russia's participation in the *Indra* exercises has been dominated by warships belonging to the Pacific Fleet, while the anti-piracy mission has been supplied with ships from all of the navy's fleets. In the last two or three years, however, this pattern has started to change. Russia has engaged in new types of naval operations as well as new forms of bilateral and multipolar cooperation and exercises. Increasingly, ships dispatched south of Suez and into the Arabian Sea hail from Russia's European fleets, particularly the Black Sea Fleet, and use the Mediterranean as a staging area.

For example, Russia has ramped up its intelligence missions to the western parts of the Arabian Sea. In early 2020, the new Black Sea Fleet intelligence ship, *Ivan Khurs*, operated in the North Arabian Sea, where it was involved in an incident where it nearly collided with the US Navy *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer *Farragut*.[290] Roughly a year later, in April 2021, the *Ivan Khurs* was once again observed south of Suez, now operating out of Port Sudan in the Red Sea.[291] A few weeks later, the *Vasilii Tatishchev*, a Baltic Fleet *Vishnya*-class intelligence ship,

[287] *Interfax* 2020; CAST 2020.
[288] *Reuters* 2021b.
[289] *Sputnik News Arabic* 2021b.
[290] *Navy Times* 2020.
[291] *Janes* 2021.

was also observed in Port Sudan.[292] Until recently, the regional intelligence efforts of Baltic and Black Sea Fleet ships had predominantly been concentrated to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Russian-Indian Exercise Series *INDRA*

The first Russian/Indian INDRA exercise took place in 2003. For the first ten years, it was a biannual naval exercise, but in 2014, the exercise became annual, and added a land phase. A naval phase has occurred on the following eleven occasions (exercises in the Indian Ocean region in bold):

2003 – Arabian Sea	**2015 – Bay of Bengal**
2005 – [No naval phase]	**2016 – Bay of Bengal**
2007 – Japanese Sea	2017 – Japanese Sea
2009 – Arabian Sea	**2018 – Arabian Sea**
2011 – [Cancelled]	**2019 – Arabian Sea**
2012 – Arabian Sea	**2020 – Bay of Bengal**
2014 – Japanese Sea	2021 – Baltic Sea

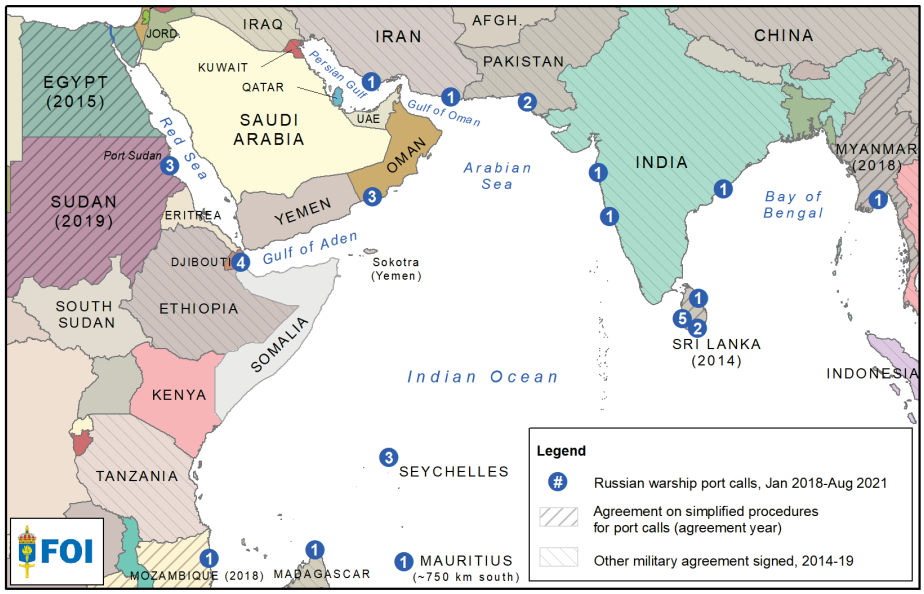
Source: TASS 2017

In December 2019, a Russian-Chinese-Iranian naval exercise, named "Marine Safety Belt - 2020," was conducted in the Northern Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. The exercise itself displayed a rather low level of complexity but, more importantly, its purpose was to signal the establishment of a maritime security cooperation structure that could serve as an alternative to the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), formed in 2019 to maintain maritime security in the northern and western Arabian Sea.[293] In mid-February 2021, another exercise occurred in the Gulf of Oman, but this time it involved only the Russian and Iranian navies. Russia's ambassador in Tehran stated that it had originally been intended as a second trilateral naval exercise, but the Chinese side had withdrawn its participation, possibly due to Covid-19. A new trilateral exercise is set to take place in the Persian Gulf in late 2021 or early 2022, however.[294]

Russia has also recently participated in other, less conspicuous naval exercises in the western Arabian Sea. Examples include a January 2020 anti-piracy exercise with the Japanese *Murasame*-class destroyer, *Harusame*, in the Gulf of Aden, and the Pakistan-organised multinational exercise Aman-2021, in the Arabian Sea.[295] Aman-2021 was in fact exceptional in two ways. It was the first naval exercise that saw the participation of both Russian and US Navy warships since Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which, although exercise elements were conducted separately, was symbolically important to Moscow.[296] Aman-2021 was also the first ever out-of-area deployment of the *Bykov*-class, a new class of patrol ships of

[292] A photo available for purchase at *Getty Images*, taken by photographer Ibrahim Ishaq, shows the Baltic Fleet *Vishnya*-class intelligence ship *Vasilii Tatishchev*, moored in Port Sudan on 27 April 2021. Getty Images 2021.
[293] Fazl-e Haider 2020.
[294] *EurAsia Daily* 2021a; *EurAsia Daily* 2021b.
[295] Russian Ministry of Defence 2020; *TASS* 2021.
[296] Similarly, in May 2018, Russia participated, with a naval training ship (*Smolnyi*-class), together with 43 other nations, including, for example, the US, Australia, Japan and France, in the Indonesian multilateral exercise, *Komodo-2018*. *Strazh Baltiki* 2018.

which the Black Sea Fleet will eventually receive six hulls. The class is designed to operate within the Mediterranean Task Force and conduct anti-piracy and patrol missions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.



Map 9. Russia's Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region

4 Conclusions and Areas for Future Study

The political and security environment of the eastern Mediterranean region is changing, forcing regional and external actors to grapple with new and uncertain circumstances. It is in this fluid regional landscape, where old assumptions no longer hold, but new equilibriums have yet to emerge, that Russia has reestablished its permanent naval presence. Operating out of its upgraded naval base in Syria and complemented by a new air base and a greatly expanded network of political and economic contacts, Russia's Mediterranean Task Force has added a new element to the regional security architecture and improved Moscow's position in the eastern Mediterranean, a conflict-prone area of critical importance to world trade.

In this report, primarily intended to serve as an explorative study, we have described and tentatively analysed the combination of these trends through a two-pronged approach. In Section 2, we looked at the eastern Mediterranean security-political environment, and especially its maritime dimensions, through four key actors: Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt. In Section 3, we investigated the reestablishment of Russia's naval presence in the region.

A Changed Eastern Mediterranean Region

The modern era's steady growth in global economic connectivity has seen maritime trade volumes rise across the world, further underlining the extraordinary importance of the eastern Mediterranean region's two main maritime chokepoints, the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal. Rising migration flows, environmental concerns, and the discovery of seabed natural gas deposits have also created new strategic incentives and challenges for state actors in the region, as has a series of major political disruptions.

In particular, the events of the 2011 Arab Spring saw new actors arrive on the scene, while old relationships and existing conflicts were reconfigured. Formerly important nations such as Syria and Libya collapsed into security vacuums and arenas for proxy conflict, leading other regional actors, most notably Turkey, to step up their regional engagement and launch into a hard-headed pursuit of new geopolitical ambitions. Concurrently, the balance and presence of external great powers on the scene is changing, as the United States turns away from the Middle East, Russia has returned in force to the region, and China rises as an economic actor.

As described in Section 2, all four of the eastern Mediterranean's main regional players have realigned their roles and priorities in the region in response to these trends:

- *Turkey* has radically revamped its foreign policy, launching hard-power interventions in multiple conflicts and working both with and against Russia to pursue its interests against a diverse array of regional competitors. As a key part of this confrontative approach, Turkey has expanded its naval capabilities and domestic shipbuilding capacity, while also increasing its focus on issues of maritime power. Erdoğan's rising military assertiveness has become one of the primary drivers of regional coalition-building, as other governments band together to seek mutual support against Turkish pressure.
- *Greece* has greatly intensified its regional outreach, seeking to balance Turkey (on the assumption that it will not be meaningfully protected by NATO or the EU) by building closer ties with France, the United States, and a coterie of new regional partners that include Egypt and Israel. This approach has seen Greece invest in new naval capabilities and collaborations, while seeking a role in the emerging eastern Mediterranean gas market.
- *Israel* has sought to adapt to the new regional environment and find Arab and European partners to balance Erdoğan's Turkey, while enacting a "turn to the sea," propelled in part by security concerns related to its recently developed gas resources. The result is a growing attention to relationships and issues that are, more or less, new to Israel.
- *Egypt* has exited the Arab Spring turbulence under new leadership, seeking stability at home in part by confronting regional rivals, primarily Turkey, through partnerships abroad. At the same time, Egypt has increased its investment in maritime energy, trade, and security in both the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea, while building up its naval capabilities.

Russia's Naval Return to the Eastern Mediterranean

Adding to the complexity, all four eastern Mediterranean key actors have had to adapt to Russia's increased activity in the region.

In March 2011, Moscow refrained from vetoing the UN resolution that enabled the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya. At the time, Russia lacked an enduring military and naval presence in the region, leaving it with a very limited capacity to pursue its interests in Libya. Discontent with its marginalisation influenced Moscow's course of action in the following years, and so, apparently, did a "fear

of missing out." The region was clearly changing in ways that would affect important Russian strategic and economic interests, and Moscow, naturally, wanted to be actively involved in this process.

In 2013, Russia formed a permanent naval task force, modelled on the Soviet 5th Mediterranean Squadron that was active in 1967–92, in the Mediterranean Sea. By re-establishing an enduring naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea, Russia would again be able to independently pursue its national interests and ensure that others could not dictate the outcomes where Russian interests were at stake.

To Russian decisionmakers, the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea illustrated the utility of keeping naval resources on standby in the region. It has clearly served as a template for the contemporary Mediterranean Task Force, but just as there are many similarities between Moscow's motivations then and now, there are also differences.

Like the Soviet Union, Russia lacks natural, independent access to the Mediterranean basin, and the access it does enjoy is constrained by politics (the Montreux Convention) and geography (distance). In this sense, the challenges in terms of sustaining a permanent naval presence are similar to those in the Soviet period. Building on its support for Syria's Assad regime, however, Russia has since 2015 greatly expanded its foothold in the eastern Mediterranean. Moscow now has the benefit of both a fully-fledged air base, Hmeymim, and a naval logistical facility, Tartous, which in practical terms functions as a naval base. Although smaller in terms of the number of vessels, the contemporary Russian Mediterranean Task Force now benefits from a naval support infrastructure that is beyond comparison with the patchy and limited support structures that were available to its Soviet predecessor from the 1960s to the 1980s.

However, the Russian government's own approach to the region is not identical to that of the Soviet Union. Whereas the *raison d'être* of the latter's 5th Mediterranean Squadron was to counter the US Sixth Fleet and serve Soviet interests in the context of a global superpower struggle, the Mediterranean Task Force appears to have less to do with balancing the United States and more with Russia's ability to pursue its national interests in the region itself. Although it is likely to be highly useful in *great-power competition*, the Mediterranean Task Force's utility in a hypothetical *great-power war*, while not negligible, appears to be a secondary consideration.

The Russian post-2013 naval presence is, in effect, an instrument to help Moscow navigate the eastern Mediterranean's choppy waters with greater confidence, maximising benefits and minimising risks through interaction with other regional or external actors in the area.

Navigating the New Regional Landscape

Today's eastern Mediterranean region is a challenging and fluid environment. The regional system is neither governed by the strict bipolarity of the Cold War, nor, at this point, by the US-dominated unipolar order of the 1990s and early 2000s. As we have seen above, regional actors increasingly play their own games, without allowing themselves to be overly constrained by traditional alignments.

To be sure, the resulting high level of change, competition, and uncertainty creates risks of violent clashes and wars. New conflicts may emerge even as old ones come alive. As seen in sections 2.2 and 2.3, maritime boundary disputes have suddenly gained new significance due to the discovery of previously unknown natural gas assets; and the long-frozen Cyprus conflict now heads into uncertain terrain as Turkey abandons its decades-old policy of formal support for the island's unity.

Considering the nature of the eastern Mediterranean region, which is made up of states ringing a sea; and considering the importance of its seabed energy assets and shipping arteries, the maritime domain will inevitably be of central importance to both regional and external actors. Through the expanded Tartous Base and the Mediterranean Task Force, Russia has acquired new tools to pursue its national interests in this domain – and, as noted in Section 3.4, to build a strong foundation for the continued expansion of its influence toward the Indian Ocean.

In Syria, we have already seen Russia deploy naval resources, including logistics, missile strikes, carrier operations, etc. In the future, it may do so in Libya or other regional crises, too. Furthermore, the Mediterranean Task Force's post-2019 oil escort collaboration with Iran and Syria demonstrates a new ability to act as a maritime security provider, which may, in coming years, be expanded not just to Libya but also south of Suez. Should conflict flare in Cyprus, the Aegean Sea, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, or elsewhere in the region, Russia will be well positioned to offer naval support or hold rival forces at risk, to assist with logistics and humanitarian missions, and to collect intelligence on rival actors or on behalf of partners. The Mediterranean Task Force will also be able to support, complement, and help secure non-maritime action, whether that be aerial operations in Syria or, hypothetically, an escalated ground/aerial intervention in Libya. Finally, the permanent naval presence serves a diplomatic and political purpose, allowing Russia to "show the flag" in crises and sensitive regions and to interact with regional governments through port calls and joint exercises.

For this and other reasons, Turkey, Egypt, and Israel have all in various ways increased their engagement with Russia in the 2010s. Although relations with Greece may have cooled slightly, Athens continues to seek positive ties with Russia.

In short, the reestablishment of Russia's permanent naval presence will allow it to project power and build influence in new ways in the eastern Mediterranean

region, increasing its attractiveness as a partner for regional actors who will be forced, at the very least, to reckon with Russia as a relevant actor.

Concluding Thoughts on Future Research

This report has merely scratched the surface of the new geopolitical context emerging in the eastern Mediterranean. Its scope has deliberately been limited to investigating the regional context, with a focus on the eastern Mediterranean's Big Four state actors and the Russian naval presence. The interests, capabilities, and future evolution of these regional states and the resources available to Russia will be crucial in shaping the region's new security architecture and Moscow's role in it. But other factors will play an important role as well.

A fuller understanding of the maritime security environment in the eastern Mediterranean will require studying the interests and capabilities of NATO and its key members. Not only do the United States and France play an especially important role in the eastern Mediterranean region, but other governments, such as Italy, also exercise great influence. While China plays a completely negligible military role in the region, its economic stake in the area is significant and Chinese acquisitions of strategic maritime infrastructure (such as the Piraeus and Haifa ports) merit further study.

Small state actors may also influence events, whether as arenas for conflict, through partnerships, or as niche actors, or all of those. This applies not least to the five eastern Mediterranean nations not covered in detail in this report: Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Libya. In addition, state actors outside the region may exercise a disproportionate political influence on its politics. For example, Gulf Arab rivalries have impacted Turkey, Egypt and, to some extent, Israel; and various Gulf states, including Iran, have in recent years played a major role in the politics of Syria, Libya, Lebanon, and Palestine.

To be sure, the evolution of regional politics will also be contingent on external and structural factors, such as the evolution and application of the Law of the Sea, global trade patterns, energy market fluctuations, and the impact of climate change on littoral regions and maritime resources.

Russia's naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean and its future evolution also merit additional study. Most obviously, continued monitoring of the Mediterranean Task Force, the support infrastructure available to it, and its conduct (exercises, etc.) will help maintain a good understanding of the present-day situation. The Russian Navy's conduct and operations while in the Mediterranean region will in no small part depend on the overall capacity to conduct out-of-area operations and the diplomatic relations to individual countries in the region. Over the longer term, however, the single-most important factor for Russia's ability to sustain a Mediterranean naval presence and to surge forces in response to emerging crises is likely the development of the Black Sea Fleet.

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