

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

[New Aggravation of Tensions with the Turkey-Greece Maritime Dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean](#)

Tensions have risen between Turkey and Greece again in recent days, after Turkey sanctioned a new naval mission to carry out seismic surveys in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish exploration vessel, the Oruc Reis, will carry out seismic surveying near the Greek Isle of Kastellorizo, which is less than 600 kilometers from Turkish shores. Greece has called the exploration mission a serious provocation and called for the European Union to back it by immediately placing sanctions on Turkey. On the other hand, Ankara dismissed the threats from Athens, and said Turkey was operating within its continental shelf which gives it exclusive economic access. Turkey and Greece have been at odds recently over contested territory in the Mediterranean and the accompanying offshore drilling rights. The dispute between Turkey and Greece stems from differing understandings of each country's maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as well as the status of Cyprus.

Greece considers the north of Cyprus to be part of the Republic of Cyprus, which would give it, and other E.U. nations the exclusive right to carry out research and exploration missions in its nearby waters. Contrasting this, Turkey considers Northern Cyprus to be an independent country with its own EEZ, which would give Turkey the right to explore and discover natural resources in the area. Building upon this, Greece believes that each of its islands in the Mediterranean is entitled to its own continental shelf, which would give it exclusive economic access to the surrounding waters. Ankara, however, believes that the abundance of Greek islands in the Mediterranean means this approach is unfair as it encroaches upon Turkey's EEZ around its coastline.

The large number of Greek islands, and the varying interpretations of how this affects Turkey and Greece's maritime boundaries, is in fact at the root of the issues between the two countries. Since Greece contends that each of its islands has its own continental shelf, this is a hinderance not only to Turkey's EEZ, but also minimizes the latter's claim to waters that are directly adjacent to its large coastline. As such, Turkish analysts sometimes argue that the Greek way of looking at the dispute leaves them in effect trapped as if they were a landlocked country, despite the fact that they have nearly 5,000 miles of coastline. Ultimately, Turkey attempts to defend its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean by highlighting the right to access the natural resources in waters within their perceived jurisdiction. The conflicting interpretations result in a situation that is extremely difficult to manage, given that both Turkey and Greece are approaching it from contradicting perspectives.

Due to the differing understandings of exclusive maritime territory in the Mediterranean, Turkey believes that the Oruc Reis is operating within its EEZ, and is therefore not subject to judgement from Greece or any other E.U. state. However, the European Union and some of its members individually, including Germany and France, have called on Turkey to stop its current research mission and negotiate with Greece to find a mutually beneficial solution. Turkey and Greece had previously agreed to meet for talks in Istanbul, but Athens called off the meeting until the research vessel ended its mission. Turkey had previously sent the Oruc Reis on a similar exploration mission in August, but pulled back after rival military drills between itself and Greece, and agreed to de-escalate. Now, however, Greece and its E.U. backers argue that Turkey is once again unilaterally aggravating the situation.

Turkey and Greece are calling on their regional and international allies to work with them to solve the dispute, although they are each taking a different approach. Greece has asked for the European Union to place sanctions on Turkey, and has requested the United States to apply pressure on Turkey to encourage them to de-escalate. Turkey, on the other hand, is lobbying for active neutrality on the part of the United States, saying that it would only harm American interests in the region to take sides. Due to the competing understandings of maritime boundaries between Greece and Turkey, active dialogue between the countries with an independent mediator appears to be the best solution. Both countries have previously expressed a willingness to negotiate with each other, and the United States and European Union should work to make that possible.