



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

[The Threats in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea](#)

by Prof. Efraim Inbar

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 156, November 24, 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The turmoil in the Arab world is changing the strategic landscape around Israel. However, one area that has received little attention is the eastern Mediterranean basin, where elements of radical Islam could gain control. In this region, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey display Islamist tendencies, leaving Israel and Greece as the only Western allies.

A review of the political dynamics in the states on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean generates great concern about the ability of the West to continue enjoying unrestricted access to this area.

Evolving political events in Libya indicate that radical Islamic elements will definitely play a greater role in the future of the country. If the transition to a new regime descends into civil war, the ensuing chaos may allow greater freedom of action for Muslim extremists from the shores of this Mediterranean country.

Next to Libya is Egypt, which is in the midst of a great confrontation between the military and the Islamist parties over the future of the country. In any case, the planned elections will in all probability catapult the Islamist parties into a dominant role in the emerging Egyptian political system.

Apart from managing important ports on the Mediterranean, Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, a waterway that links Europe to the Persian Gulf and the Orient. This is a critical passageway that might fall into the hands of the Islamists.

Significantly, Egypt has already opened the Suez Canal to military vessels belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This enhances the ability of radical Iran to supply its Mediterranean allies, such as the current regime in Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza. Moreover, it has enhanced Iranian access to Muslim states in the Balkans, namely Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo, thereby increasing its influence in that part of the Mediterranean.

Even if the Egyptian military is able to curtail the Islamist forces in the state, its grip over the Sinai Peninsula is a different issue. The tenuous control of Egypt over Sinai has weakened since the fall of the Mubarak regime. Sinai has become a highway for weapons smuggling into Gaza and a base for the activities of several Muslim terror organizations. This situation could lead to the "Somalization" of Sinai, negatively affecting the safety of naval trade along the Mediterranean, the approaches to the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea.

Next to Sinai is Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, a radical Islamist organization allied with Iran. Israel's enforced naval blockade on Gaza has increasingly been criticized by the international community. Considering the recent political changes in Egypt and their detrimental impact on the Egyptian-Israeli relations, the containment of the Islamist threat from Gaza will become even more challenging in the near future.

North of Israel, along the Mediterranean coast, sits Lebanon, a state dominated by radical Shiite Hizballah whose ports are inhospitable from a Western perspective. Hizballah has already laid claim to some of the huge Israeli-found gas fields in the sea that could diminish Europe's energy dependence on Russia and Turkey. Moreover, Syria, an enemy of Israel and a current ally of Iran, exerts considerable influence in Lebanon. Its Mediterranean shores, north of Lebanon, are also hostile to the West and its ports even supply services to the Russian navy. The Assad regime in Syria faces great domestic opposition and may fall. Considering the current trends in the Arab world, a Syrian successor regime could also be Islamist and anti-Western.

The next state on the eastern Mediterranean coastline is the AKP-ruled Turkey. The country has over the past few years shifted away from a pro-Western foreign policy, instead adopting a radical stance on many issues. Its current government supports Hamas and Hizballah, opposes sanctions on Iran and holds strident anti-Israel positions. This reflects the AKP's clear Islamic coloration. Moreover, Turkey has displayed huge ambitions for leadership in the Middle East, Central Asia, the

Caucasus, the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. A combination of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic-Jihadist impulses has pushed Turkey into an aggressive stance on several regional issues.

Turkey has flexed its naval muscles, threatening Israel that it will escort flotillas trying to break the blockade on Gaza. It has also threatened Cyprus in order to secure its share of the potential energy riches south of the island. Turkey is interested in gaining control over the maritime gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean as this would help fulfill its ambitions to serve as an energy bridge to the West, thereby creating a dependence on it. This may lead Turkish troops, stationed in the northern part of divided Cyprus, to complete the conquest of the island started in 1974. Such a Turkish takeover would not only hurt Western geo-economic interests, but would constitute a significant Western loss of the strategically situated island. The Cypriot island served as a bone of contention in the past between Persia and the ancient Greeks, and between the Ottomans and Venetians. In short, it represents the struggle between East and West.

West of Turkey is Greece, a democratic Western state with a clear interest to protect the Cypriots from Muslim domination. Its current economic crisis, however, might erode its limited military ability to parry the Turkish challenge alone. With the exception of Israel, all other eastern Mediterranean states would likely favor the return of Cyprus to Muslim rule and the ascendancy of Islam in the eastern Mediterranean.

Western influence in the eastern Mediterranean is being challenged by the growing radical Islamic influence in the region. The access of Iran to Mediterranean waters, the disruptive potential of failed states, and the competition across countries for energy resources is destabilizing the region. But it is not clear that Western powers, particularly the US, are aware of the possibility of losing the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to radical Islam or are preparing in any way to forestall such a scenario. Foolishly, they seem to believe that the so-called "Arab Spring" heralds an improved political environment and that Turkey represents "moderate Islam." American naiveté and European gullibility could become extremely costly in strategic terms.

Efraim Inbar is a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies.

BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family