



What lies ahead for Greece and Turkey

COMMENTARY | BY MARIA GAVOUNELI *

What a difference a day makes... Just last week, the conversation in this part of the planet almost exclusively revolved around the procedure for a Greek-Turkish rapprochement, in view of the slow, painful – and ongoing – war in Ukraine. The parameters of the problem were undisputed: The negotiation has two prongs, political dialogue and confidence building measures at the military level, the results of which will be brought to the table at the next meeting of the Greek-Turkish High-Level Cooperation Council in Thessaloniki on December 7. Everyone seems to agree that this process is noteworthy in itself, both as a mechanism for de-escalating tension in the field as well as for strengthening much-needed and sorely lacking trust between the two sides. Even if nothing comes of these efforts to solve the differences that divide us, we have already secured a few months of quiet in the skies of the Aegean, saving significant economic and military resources. This period of calm strengthens tourism and also appears to make cooperation on migration easier.

Up until now, this situation existed in an international framework that seemed long-lasting, if not permanent. The always turbulent East Mediterranean was at the epicenter of multiple peace efforts. The Abraham Accords recognizing Israel's right to exist also contributed to the creation of a corridor for transporting goods and energy from Piraeus across the Indian and Pacific oceans, all the way to Australia, via India, Japan and South Korea – to the obvious benefit of Greek shipping. Tripartite cooperation schemes in the narrower neighborhood of the Middle East translated into pipelines and cables transporting energy and electricity from the Global South to the northern coast of Europe and beyond. Not to mention that the delimitation agreement between Israel and Lebanon, though still not in full effect, appeared to prove that miracles can happen when everyone is wishing for them. And Turkey, vacillating between its self-perceived role as a regional power and the need for financial support from the European Union and more warplanes from the United States, showed a readiness to embrace pressure for peace and collaboration in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. This was viewed as a constructive element in its effort to strike a balance between the democratic pole of peace and the authoritarian pole associated with armed conflicts.

Hamas' brutal attack on Isra-



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses lawmakers from his ruling AK Party at Parliament in Ankara, last week. Ankara's usual balancing act does not seem to be paying off in the Middle East, for the time being at least.

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el blew up this entire comforting framework. Efforts to normalize the Middle East have gone straight out the window. Trade routes and energy deals will need to be redrawn, while migrant flows will inevitably pick up again. The biggest difference for us, however, lies in the role Turkey is playing, as it has an immediate impact on the prospects of the Greek-Turkish dialogue.

With regard to the war in Ukraine, Turkey managed to hover between the conflicting poles, not so much as a deliberately neutral power but as a necessary partner. It thus found itself as the only member of NATO that did not participate in the sanctions against Russia while producing drones for Ukraine and negotiating with Moscow for the transportation of grain through the Straits to se-

cure the food supply, especially for African countries. Playing a decisive role in the Caucasus and the Turkic countries, as the events in Nagorno-Karabakh – where the local Armenian population is experiencing its own Asia Minor Catastrophe – demonstrated, Turkey feels powerful enough to enter negotiations with Greece without budging a centimeter from its fundamental position on maritime zones, demilitarization, the so-called gray zones and the sovereignty of the Aegean islands. Its effort to remove the European parameter from the equation, in reality aimed at separating Greece from its organic integration into the European Union, was compounded by its ongoing attempt to exert pressure on NATO, and on the United States especially, over Sweden's entry into the Alliance.

Ankara's usual balancing act does not seem to be paying off, for the time being at least. Its expressed support not for the Palestinian people who have indeed suffered in the dire straits of the Gaza Strip, but for the religious fanatics of Hamas – who want to bring ISIS practices such as isolating women behind the veil and beheading anyone who

disagrees with them to the shores of the Mediterranean – has set the alarm bells ringing. The feeling that Ankara has lost its sense of moderation is already evident in Syria, where the Americans brought down a Turkish drone that came too close to its troops.

Inevitably, the conversation about Greek-Turkish relations has dropped on the international community's list of priorities. Does this mean less pressure from friends and allies on both sides of the Atlantic for tangible progress, even in the form of a non-resolution that would, nevertheless, reduce the likelihood of tension in the future? Perhaps, but the easing of such pressure would shift the onus directly onto our shoulders, as we would be obliged to do what we have always said, which is to create the long-term conditions for a calm coexistence. Being out of the limelight may help toward a more effective negotiation – but only if we manage to stay at the same table.

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