
Introduction

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Over the last two decades, the Mediterranean has become an important region. Many scholars, policymakers and analysts have mostly referred to this region from a nexus of security, geopolitics and traditional energy politics. With the war in Ukraine, the relevance of this whole region has increased along the same line. The Mediterranean today is home to some of the most enduring conflicts in the world. New energy resources are being discovered in disputed areas in an environment of intense geopolitical competition over regional leadership and energy routes within and beyond the region.

This policy study addresses a selected number of important conflicts in the Mediterranean, which include an energy component and in which progress towards resolution can trigger broader cooperation and inclusivity in the region. It includes four chapters: an overview of energy-related conflicts and conflict resolution initiatives in the Mediterranean; the Cyprus conflict; the Israeli-Lebanese maritime border agreement; and the mounting tensions between Algeria, Morocco and their immediate European neighbours. Each of the four chapters was written utilising a conceptual angle that combines the new energy perspective and diplomacy. The chapters suggest new conflict resolution mechanisms, include policy recommendations, and can serve to enrich the public debate on Mediterranean diplomacy.

In chapter 1, Hesham Youssef addresses how the energy dimension affects several conflicts in the Mediterranean – Cyprus, Greece-Türkiye, Israel-Lebanon, and the Western Sahara. He examines how countries are cooperating, competing or strategising in response to their adversaries, how energy might intensify ongoing conflicts, and whether energy can be leveraged to reduce tensions, advance cooperation, and promote peacemaking in the region. Youssef asserts that even if energy agreements – similar to the one between Israel and Lebanon – are reached, they will not be a panacea for these conflicts. However, they can contribute to deescalating tensions and can be built on to advance the prospects of peace. For Youssef, time is of the essence, and the international community should play an active role in this regard.

In chapter 2, Michael Harari and Ahmet Sözen argue that the Israeli-Lebanese relationship has been shaped by unique developments and long-standing disputes. The recent maritime border agreement, effectively brokered by United States (US) mediator Amos Hochstein, has been reached in the context of an unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanon, renewed elections in Israel, and a European push for regional gas in view of the war in Ukraine. The indirect negotiations have been conducted between rival countries, and the pragmatic deal that was struck did not include normalisation but rather focused on energy alone. Israel and Lebanon moved from being two enemies with a disputed maritime border to two neighbouring countries whose national interests converged. They both benefited from a window of opportunity for natural resources, in which local energy resources acted as a catalyst for an ad-hoc and

win-win problem solving process. This chapter highlights the lessons learned from this process and proposes recommendations and ways forward for both countries and others in the region.

In chapter 3, Ahmet Sözen describes conflict resolution initiatives – led by the United Nations (UN) and others – which had been tried in Cyprus with the aim of reaching a comprehensive solution to the conflict on the island. Unfortunately, these initiatives have not yet yielded a breakthrough. Though the discovery of the hydrocarbon resources around Cyprus has brought a new dimension to the Cyprus issue, it has not been creatively utilised so far. In this chapter, Sözen looks at the Cyprus issue from a fresh perspective that combines the energy issue with novel conflict resolution and diplomatic mechanisms. He calls upon policymakers from both sides of the conflict to engage with each other even without recognition, and specifically take the cooperation on the energy issue to the core of future negotiations as it became paramount in the post-Ukraine crisis.

In chapter 4, Intissar Fakir argues that the geopolitics of the Western Mediterranean are increasingly being shaped by the relationship between Algeria and Morocco, as neighbours and competitors. The zero-sum approach that has driven Algerian-Moroccan relations has increasingly impacted Europe's own engagement in the area, and has frustrated efforts to balance them. While Morocco has long been a valuable ally in the Mediterranean, recent scandals have increased European Union (EU) frustrations. For Algeria, the European demand for energy security is reshaping the EU's appetite and parameters for engagement with it. The desire to keep Algeria's relationship with Russia as limited as possible is also bound to feature in this calculus. Other than preparing for further outbursts of tension and their potentially disruptive effects in the Western Mediterranean, Europe should focus on advancing conflict mitigation measures by supporting more opportunities for unofficial exchange and communication and continuing to push Western Saharan negotiations forward in a meaningful way. Investing in the youth of both countries could also help reshape perceptions in a more positive light.

In conclusion, energy – mostly natural gas – can play a game-changing role in the Mediterranean, especially in the wake of the energy crises created by the war in Ukraine. New conflict resolution initiatives in the region should take energy into account, and include novel ways of solving existing conflicts. In that regard, the Israel-Lebanon maritime border deal stands as a genuine inspiration for many conflicts in the broader Mediterranean region.

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