



The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East after the fall of Assad's regime in Syria

Between cooperation opportunities and regional challenges

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ABSTRACT: This thematic study proposes an analysis of possible evolutions in the international arena, having as epicentre the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East region, following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. The author approaches this topic by testing the working hypothesis that, although the influence of individual states seems to grow (e.g. Israel, Türkiye), the end of the Assad regime also opened opportunities for the continuation of some major regional projects and even the initiation of new ones. First among them is the logistical India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), as well as the electric cable connecting Israel, Cyprus, Crete, and continental Greece. Such projects are treated analytically as independent variables, which can determine decisively the strategic posture and policies of state and non-state actors from the region and even from outside it (dependent variable). Although he avoids formulating final suggestions concerning the policies of the actors involved, especially because he does not approach the topic from the perspective of individual states, the author concludes this thematic study by offering an answer to the main interrogation. Based on the evidence found, the answer emphasises both opportunities for cooperation and possible challenges coming from the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region in the post-Assad era.

KEYWORDS: Syria, Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye, Israel, European Union, USA, cooperation.



INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Damascus regime and the flight of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow in December 2024, coupled with the strikes by Israel against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, seems to mark the end of Russian-Iranian influence in the region, or at least the beginning of its decline. Within various analytical and political circles, there is a growing perception that Türkiye is one of the beneficiaries of these developments. Thus, Türkiye's support for the Sunni rebels, who were victorious in Damascus, would automatically lead to the subordination of the post-Assad Syrian leadership to Türkiye's regional security agenda. Another view shared by some observers is that Israel, supported by the United States, will emerge as another decisive actor in the region, especially after the apparent elimination of threats posed by Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to this logic, the situation in the Middle East could evolve into a scenario where Iran and Russia no longer represent a significant threat, while Türkiye, Israel, the United States, and Washington's Arab allies in the region become the key actors.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study critically examines the logic of the assumptions outlined above, posing the following *central question*: Does the fall of Assad's regime favour a decisive increase in the influence of individual states, or does it rather create conditions for significant progress in certain regional cooperation projects? This question is important because it addresses both key future developments in the Middle East and the behaviour toward those developments of actors whose interests extend beyond the region considered here. The answer to this question could also influence the attitude of European governments toward partners in the Middle East.

To reach an answer to the main question, I test the *hypothesis* that, although the influence of individual states will increase in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, the fall of Assad's regime has also paved the way for the continuation of major regional projects and even for the initiation of new ones. These include global-scale logistical corridors, as well



as the exploitation of natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. Such opportunities are already drawing interest from both state and non-state actors, and will undoubtedly shape the behaviour of regional states and even that of actors from outside the region. In this context, the ability of actors like Türkiye or Israel to impose their political agendas will depend on the manner, either cooperative or not, in which they choose to engage with the development projects and associated opportunities in the Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean region.

The sum of the factors mentioned above and of the actors involved, treated analytically as the *independent variable*, could rather lead to the dilution of influence from a single state or a small group of states. The interests of other countries from the broader region, aligned with those of the US and the European Union, may prevail (*dependent variable*). In this context, the present study explains that, for example, Cyprus appears to become an increasingly important piece in the puzzle of regional politics, representing a critical land bridge for east-west logistical chains and energy networks. Considering that the stability and prosperity of the island depend on external support, much like Syria's reconstruction, it is likely that the West (the US and the EU) and its Arab partners, together with Israel, will ultimately impose a minimal but common agenda in both Syria and Cyprus. The outcome could be a relatively integrated Western policy towards this geopolitically significant area. It remains to be seen whether the current regimes in Ankara and Jerusalem will choose to participate in the conception and implementation of this agenda in the spirit of regional cooperation, or whether they will seek to undermine it. The governments of these two countries currently have seemingly divergent agendas, but the ongoing regional projects could encourage cooperation.

The Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean are regions that serve as a bridge between some of the most diverse economies and cultures. While trade links have existed since the dawn of humanity, the modern era has also brought about energy transfers, both over land and along maritime routes. In recent years, significant natural gas reserves have been discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. These discoveries enhance the region's energy potential for the coastal states as well as for Europe, where efforts are underway to reduce dependence on the Russian Federation and other authoritarian regimes hostile to the West, including Iran. Building on these aspects, the thematic study addresses the main question by focusing on two key areas: (1) major logistical corridors crossing the region; and (2) energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. The text is structured around these domains to



highlight the role of various factors and actors, ultimately providing conclusions in response to the central question posed here.

1. THE SOUTHERN CORRIDOR AND THE INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (IMEC)

The war in Ukraine and, more broadly, Russia's aggressive behaviour over the past decade has closed the northern corridor, which passes through its territory to connect Asia with Europe. On the other hand, the central corridor is monopolised by China through its massive *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). The southern corridor is the only route available for global trade without interference from Moscow or Beijing, following the traditional route through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal. However, it remains insufficient, suffering from logistical blockages in the Suez Canal and, more recently, security issues in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Houthi Shiite rebels from Yemen have been attacking cargo ships passing through the strait. Iran has repeatedly praised these attacks, calling them successes in the broader resistance against the West.

Global trade traffic through the southern corridor, which was estimated at 15% of total global trade before October 2023, has now dropped to less than half (World Bank 2024). This dramatic decline is due not only to the threat itself posed by the rebels but also to the dramatic rise in insurance costs for goods and cargo vessels caused by the insecurity situation. Moreover, with the decline in traffic, transit fees have reduced significantly, leading to billions of dollars in losses for states in the region, particularly Egypt (Diakun 2024; Eavis and Alderman 2024; Shadi 2024).

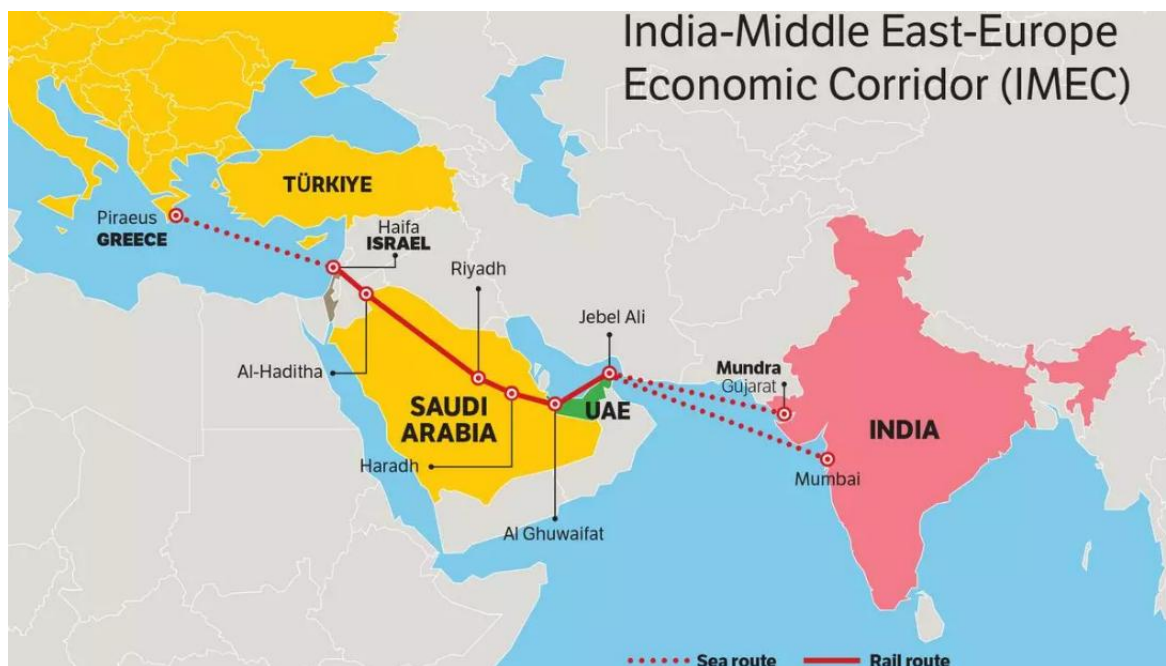
In this context, the *India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor* (IMEC) project has gained significant momentum. It is a commercial link designed to integrate and streamline transport and communication lines between Asia (India), the Middle East, and Europe. IMEC is not an alternative but rather complementary to the traditional southern corridor via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. It is considered useful both in the current context, given the insecurity in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and for the future, due to the increasing congestion of traffic through the Suez Canal (Rizzi 2024). Furthermore, IMEC could have a political impact, providing strong incentives for the pacification and stabilisation of the Middle East. Its land route passes through the United Arab Emirates (UAE, Jebel Ali Port), Saudi Arabia, Jordan,



and Israel (Haifa Port). When correlated with the implementation of the Abraham Accords, initiated by the first Trump administration in 2020, IMEC could contribute to the establishment of long-term beneficial cooperation for the countries in the region that choose to participate and invest in the project, rather than undermine it. Finally, the project is strongly promoted by India because it would ensure better and more cost-effective connectivity for its vast economy to the markets in the Middle East and to the European common market. The time required for goods transit from Mumbai to Piraeus would be reduced by about 40%, and costs by around 30%, including risk-related costs (Khatri 2023).

A Memorandum of Understanding for initiating investments and works under the IMEC was signed at the G20 summit in New Delhi on September 9, 2023, by India, the US, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union (White House 2023; Akdemir & Ivri Ada 2023). Currently, the implementation is facing delays, particularly due to Israel's intervention in Gaza, but significant progress has been made both in the Mediterranean part and in the Eastern part towards the UAE (Hussain & Malik 2024).

The corridor will consist of high-capacity port connections between maritime lines, railways, and highways. Additionally, terrestrial and submarine cables for electricity and digital communications will be included, as well as interconnected solar panel fields. The declared goal of this effort is not only to enhance the efficiency of global trade but also to contribute to the energy security of the participating actors. Moreover, IMEC promises to be much more efficient than other alternatives, including the BRI, as it incorporates longer maritime segments and will rely on advanced technologies, green energy, and digital infrastructure. It will also be accompanied by pipelines and other facilities for the transfer of green and blue hydrogen from India to Europe, passing through the Gulf, where there is significant production potential, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Heinemann *et al.* 2022). Finally, a crucial detail is that IMEC does not contain the debt traps for participating states from Chinese financiers (Condon 2023; Nizhizawa 2023), nor does it suffer from the inefficient management of investments and risks, as seen in the BRI project (Clark 2023).



Source: Gilani 2023.

Although the conflict in the Gaza Strip has delayed IMEC, modernization works are expected to resume on the railway link between the UAE and Israel, and the Haifa port is in the process of being expanded under the management of an Israeli-Indian consortium. The consortium won the contract after Israel, apparently under pressure from the Pentagon, abandoned its collaboration on this matter with certain Chinese enterprises. Such developments, including progress regarding IMEC, are also facilitated by the very strong cooperation between Israel and India in recent years, marked by unprecedented growth in bilateral trade and the contribution of Israel's arms industry to India's security (Markey & Youssef 2022).

The positioning of the main actors in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region toward IMEC

India is currently the driving force behind IMEC, with the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi being very active in its relationships with partners along the route. In September 2024, representatives from India and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** signed a memorandum in Mumbai for the creation of the *India-UAE Virtual Commerce Corridor*. This presupposes a massive effort to digitize administrative and logistical services operating

between the two countries. The investment, worth tens of billions of US dollars, is designed as an essential logistical part of the efficient functioning of IMEC (Chaudhury 2024; FE Business 2024).¹

US's support is also important. The Biden administration has seen IMEC from the outset as a natural response to China's monopolising of the central corridor through the BRI. Furthermore, it represents an opportunity for the profitable, large-scale involvement of American companies, particularly those specialising in logistics and international trade. After the Trump administration took office at the White House, US commitment to the corridor seems to have intensified, as has **France's** support. Recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Washington and Paris, where the project received explicit and even enthusiastic backing from the US and French presidents. Donald Trump stated, "The US and India will work together to build one of the greatest trade routes in all of history" (Roy 2025; Pareek 2025).

This growing support is also explained by the strategic value of IMEC on the regional and global political stage. First, the project makes **Israel** an even more important actor in the Middle East than it already was, and this seems to be another reason why the Trump administration reconfirmed and even increased the US commitment to the route. Second, IMEC can also serve as a benchmark for assessing how other actors in the region align with the US policy. The corridor runs directly from East to West through the Arabian Peninsula, and thus cannot pass through countries like Oman, Qatar, Egypt, Iran, or Turkey (Ghanem & Sánchez-Cacicedo 2024, p. 3). And, if Iran has already made it clear it will not cooperate with the West and Israel, land routes extended through Egypt or Türkiye would incur excessively high costs, and the transit of goods would take even longer. These are simple and well-founded arguments in favour of the current, direct route.

However, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed outward hostility, even threatening that "there will be no corridor without **Türkiye**" (Soylu 2023). Ankara, instead, prefers involvement in the realisation of the Development Road (DR) initiated by **Iraq**. This project involves completing the construction of the massive Iraqi Faw Port at the Persian Gulf

¹ See also The Times of India. 2024. India-UAE launches virtual trade corridor to enhance ease of doing business", *The Times of India*, September 11. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/india-uae-launches-virtual-trade-corridor-to-enhance-ease-of-doing-business/articleshow/113256441.cms> (accessed 6 February 2025).



and modernising the road, rail, and telecommunications networks from this logistics hub to the Turkish border and then to the Caucasus to the North and Europe to the West. The initiation of the DR was marked with the signing of a memorandum in Baghdad in April 2024 by representatives of the governments of Iraq, Türkiye, **Qatar**, and the **UAE**. It is estimated that investments will exceed 17 billion USD, but the risks are significant. After all, this is a logistical corridor through Iraqi territory, where conflicts are frequent between different Islamist Shia and Sunni factions with the Iraqi state authorities. **Saudi Arabia**, initially involved, has since withdrawn, leaving Qatar and the UAE as the main financial contributors. The DR remains problematic also because it would expose cargo vessels to the Iranian threat in the Persian Gulf. Beyond these details, the route is not actually an alternative to IMEC but rather a more expensive variant through and towards the north, predominantly on land and serving smaller markets in the Caucasus, not the large common European market or those in the Middle East.

Despite sometimes hostile public positions towards IMEC, other countries in the region seem to have understood that they can gain significant benefits by connecting to the India-Europe route. The Gulf Railway, also known as the *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Railway*, is a project of the Cooperation Council of the countries in the region (excluding Iran and Yemen). When completed, around 2030, the *GCC Railway* will connect the rail networks of **Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman** to IMEC. This will transform the Persian Gulf region, through IMEC, into a pivotal logistics hub for global trade. Suffering from the decline in traffic and the reduction in transit fees along the traditional route through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, **Egypt** has also reoriented itself towards IMEC. Its government is now working on revitalizing the railway through the Sinai Peninsula to the northeast (Gibon 2023; Saher 2024; Singh et al. 2024).

Türkiye, Iran, and Yemen remain the only countries in the region not participating in this major regional project, each for its reasons. However, Ankara's hostility stands out as a formal ally of the West, but with its ambitions in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. No matter how much influence the current regime in Türkiye will have over post-Assad Damascus, it is still hard to imagine that it could push **Syria**, once it becomes a functional state, to align with Ankara's hostility towards IMEC. This would go against the regional integration interest, an integration that would facilitate Syria's reconstruction. The **United States, Israel, the European Union**, and the other initiators and supporters of IMEC do not seem intimidated

by these threats and will most probably continue the implementation of the corridor. However, things become more complicated when it comes to the exploitation of natural gas reserves in the region.

2. ENERGY RESOURCES IN THE WIDER EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AREA

Noble Energy's 2010 surveys, later certified by the US Geological Survey (USGS), indicated [exploitable quantities in the eastern Mediterranean](#) of over 6,000 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas and over 7 billion barrels of oil (Mateescu 2024b). Most of the gas deposits are in Egypt's territorial waters, with an estimated 2,000 bcm. The Egyptian government has built and operates two major liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants, at Idku and Damietta. These LNG plants are currently the only such facilities in the region. Cyprus also has proven reserves of over 200 bcm in its territorial waters and is making significant progress on a floating LNG terminal, named *Prometheus*. The *Prometheus* is currently en route to the Cypriot port of Vasilikos, having departed from a shipyard in Shanghai in December. It is scheduled to begin processing natural gas sometime in the first quarter of 2026 (Stylianou 2025).

Cyprus is the only EU member country not connected to the European energy networks, and the gas from its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) could meet its internal demand. However, the island remains vulnerable to Türkiye's policies via the northern entity and also remains vulnerable to Ankara's plans regarding the delineation of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean, both concerning Lebanon and the new leadership in Damascus. The pattern set by the Türkiye-Libya EEZ (2019), which led to a major dispute with Greece and Egypt, has already created tensions in the wider region.

At the same time, Cyprus's importance grows with the development of the Great Sea Interconnector (GSI), for which negotiations take place with other economic partners and is supported by the US due to the GSI utilising gas from Israel's EEZ (Dalitis 2024). The project also benefits from the support of the EU, having already been included in the list of projects of common interest as part of the Euro-Asia Interconnector. This would mean European funding for a significant portion of the GSI costs.² In essence, it involves a cable stretching 1,208

² See also Directorate-General for Energy, „Commission participates in launch of EuroAsia Electricity Interconnector”, European Commission, Nicosia, 14th of October 2022, https://commission.europa.eu/news/commission-participates-launch-euroasia-electricity-interconnector-2022-10-14_en

kilometres from Israel via Cyprus to Crete and Mainland Greece, capable of transferring 1,000 MW of electricity between producers of liquefied natural gas (LNG)-based electricity in the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe. This could potentially turn Cyprus into “Europe’s saviour” and not the poor energy child of the Union, as one CEPA analyst put it (Godwin 2025). GSI will complement Europe's electricity supply already contracted under another project, i.e. a cable planned to connect Azeri producers to the EU via Georgia, the Black Sea, and Romania.

Returning to GSI, Israel is directly interested in its realisation because it would facilitate the export of its surplus energy. Significant reserves have been identified in Israel's EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean (approximately 1,000 bcm), and some Israeli companies are already exporting LNG refined at the two Egyptian platforms (Mateescu 2024b). Through cooperation with Egypt, which would have been unthinkable in other times, Israel can thus contribute to diversifying the EU's energy sources, which is now under pressure to do so following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. European countries and the Union have already prepared for this scenario, investing heavily in numerous liquefaction/gasification stations in Greece, Croatia, Italy, France, and Spain (Jallal 2024).

It should also be noted that we are witnessing a possible paradigm shift in the sector. LNG imports have been steadily increasing in recent years. They accounted for over 40% of the total natural gas imported by the EU in 2023, with a 19% decrease in 2024, but against the backdrop of a 20% reduction in overall consumption for that year. LNG imports from Russia have fallen from 41% in 2021 to 18% in 2024. Russia's share has been replaced by suppliers from the US (45% of EU's LNG imports in 2024), Algeria (11%), Qatar (10%), Norway (5%), Nigeria (4%), and smaller percentages from other sources, depending on European market demand, prices, or recorded temperatures.³

Another factor driving the paradigm shift seems to be the availability and export policies of the suppliers. Doha, for instance, confirmed earlier this year that it does not revive the pipeline project to transport natural gas from Qatar to Türkiye via Syria. Even after the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus, potential security and logistical issues associated with

³ The sources for these numbers are the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER), Analysis of the European LNG market developments: 2024 Market Monitoring Report, https://www.acer.europa.eu/monitoring/MMR/LNG_market_developments_2024 (accessed February 25, 2025); European Commission, Liquefied natural gas, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/carbon-management-and-fossil-fuels/liquefied-natural-gas_en (accessed February 25, 2025); Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, Europe LNG Tracker, February 2025. <https://ieefa.org/european-lng-tracker> (accessed February 25, 2025).

pipelines have made Qatari producers stick to LNG exports via maritime routes (Newsroom Türkiye 2025). In general, exporters seem to be leaning towards LNG, given the decreasing costs of this product, which is also becoming increasingly available, especially when compared to the costs of building, maintaining and securing pipelines across land.

Approaches of key actors towards energy exploitation and exports in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region

The fall of the Assad regime and the installation of the provisional government led by Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa have opened the way for the normalisation of relations between the countries in the region amid the reduction of Iran and Russia's influence. **Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus** have the largest gas reserves and the capacity to attract support for their plans from other actors. The **US** and the **EU** have already expressed support on multiple occasions and in various ways, including through investments. Just like in the case of IMEC, **Türkiye** reappears in this context as an interfering variable.

Now, in the post-Assad era, it is finally possible to discuss the delimitation of exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean through negotiations that would have to include Damascus. The main goal is not the delimitation itself but establishing very clearly the ownership rights to the currently confirmed underwater gas deposits, as well as those that may be discovered and confirmed in the future. However, the regime in Ankara, disturbed by not being included in the delimitation agreements and cooperation schemes, has chosen a policy of aggressive interference.

There is already the precedent from 2019 when **Türkiye** concluded an agreement to delimit the exclusive economic zone with the **Libyan government in Tripoli**. This complicated matters in the region because it practically isolated the Eastern Mediterranean from the rest of the region. **Greece** and **Egypt** responded with a bilateral agreement one year later, in 2020, which countered the Turkish-Libyan division. However, Athens and Nicosia accuse Ankara of coordinating actions in the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea against the interests of Greece and Cyprus, seemingly aligning with the well-known *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) doctrine. This doctrine is said to have been adopted by the current regime in Ankara in the spirit of what some describe as "Neo-Ottomanism". By the words of a Turkish veteran analyst who warned five years ago (Çandar 2020), Islamist Neo-Ottomanism and the *Mavi*



Vatan doctrine appear to be designed precisely to stimulate the “perpetual conflict” in the region. The two concepts involve the expansion of Türkiye’s interests over large portions of the seas surrounding the Anatolian Peninsula, thus overlapping with maritime areas considered by Athens and Nicosia as theirs or neutral. In the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular, the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine also extends to the area around the **Turkish entity in Northern Cyprus**, although it is recognised only by Ankara. This, in turn, blocks realistic discussions about the rights of other states in the region, especially considering the precedent of the Turkish-Libyan agreement.

While the **European Union** supports Cyprus’s cause as a member state in its territorial insular integrity, Türkiye's policy adds new points of friction to its already problematic relationship with Brussels. Ankara’s interference also irritates **Israel** and **Egypt** and, implicitly, their allies in Washington and the Arab world as well. There is, therefore, a high likelihood that, despite its ambitions and the special relationship with the new regime in Damascus, Türkiye will ultimately be limited in its attempts to influence developments in the region via Siria. Although the shocks caused by the new Trump administration in the White House may bring surprises at any time, it is hard to believe that the US will reduce its support for **Israel** and other projects that can help peace and stability in the Middle East. Steps have already been taken in this direction in Jerusalem.

Since 2010, Israel has developed very close relations with the two Hellenic states, Greece and Cyprus, forming what was then called the “**energy triangle**”. This refers to cooperation for the exploitation of the three major gas fields between Cyprus and Israel: Tamar, Aphrodite, and Leviathan. Türkiye has treated this cooperation with hostility, claiming that it disregards the rights of the Turkish entity in Northern Cyprus. The Turkish-Libyan agreement of 2019 then added fuel to the fire. The response from the “energy triangle” was the expansion of regional cooperation with the **East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EastMed)**. The founding charter of the Forum was adopted and signed by members in September 2020, and its headquarters was established in Cairo. These were the years when Presidents Erdoğan and el-Sisi exchanged harsh public remarks, caused in part by the Turkish leader’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Within EastMed, which initially discussed cooperation plans for the expansion of gas exploitation and export, **Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus** were joined by **Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Italy, and France** (since 2021) as members. The **European Union** and

the **US** participate in meetings as observers. The project for a super-pipeline to export gas to Europe was abandoned due to the huge distance and the associated costs and risks, but various alternatives were examined. This led to the *Great Sea Interconnector (GSI)*, a project originally designed to transfer gas-generated energy from the **Israeli maritime zone** to **Greece** and **Europe**. An agreement in this regard was signed in December 2024 by the two governments, with the Israeli side expressing its “full support” (Kathimerini 2024). After many discussions on contractual details, particularly regarding the involvement of the **Cypriot** government authorities, an agreement was reached in February 2025 between Nicosia and a consortium led by Chevron, which now holds the license for operations in the island’s waters. The agreement includes the floating liquefaction terminal *Prometheus*, but now also extends through the construction of a pipeline to **Egypt**, so the exportable gas can be processed at the two liquefaction stations there. An agreement regarding the pipeline and its operation was also concluded between Cyprus and Egypt in February (Damaskinos 2025; Nedos 2025).

Thus, the “energy triangle” has become a “square,” with Egypt joining the group of countries in the region directly interested and cooperating very closely for the exploitation of their resources to utilise on their markets as well as to export energy to Europe. It is in this logic that another success of Greek-Egyptian cooperation should be interpreted, namely **GREGY**. This refers to the bi-directional electric cable connection between **Egypt** and **Greece** for the transfer of wind energy to the Greek side, which has solar energy resources during the day but a deficit at night. Egypt can provide this energy at favourable prices from wind fields to be built in the country’s north-western desert area. The project is being executed by the Greek company Copelouzos and has been included under the name *GREGY-Elica Interconnector* on the European Commission's list of priority projects (Aposporis 2024).

Türkiye, which was not included in such cooperation schemes simply because its geographical location does not permit it, reacted with its own initiative as early as December 2024. During the first visit of the new Syrian leader to Ankara, discussions began regarding a Turkish-Syrian treaty for maritime border delimitation between the two countries (Fay 2024). Turkish media, largely subordinate to Erdoğan's regime, addressed the announcement of these talks with much stridency, suggesting that the Turkish-Syrian delimitation could affect the plans and investments of other states in the region. Therefore, in January 2025, Greece and Cyprus reacted within the EU, insisting that any future lifting of the Union’s sanctions on Syria be conditional. Among the conditions are those related to the possibility of Damascus



concluding a maritime agreement with Ankara without considering the interests of Cyprus and Greece. And the European Commission seems to have taken these aspects into account (Voudouri 2025).

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTEXT

This thematic study started from the question of whether the fall of the Assad regime in Syria would decisively increase the influence of individual states or, rather, create conditions for significant progress in some regional cooperation projects. The question arises in the context of the initial perception among analysts that Israel, supported by the US, as well as Türkiye, would become decisive factors in the region against the backdrop of the diminishing influence of Syria and Russia. The analysis presented here introduces important regional development plans that have a global impact, sparking interest from many other actors in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean region, but also beyond it.

The data presented here suggests that these regional cooperation projects might be decisive in the medium and long term rather than the ideological and geostrategic ambitions of individual states. The projects promote the involvement of most states in this geographical area but also of some state and non-state actors from outside it. Furthermore, such mobilisation could, in fact, limit the attempts of Türkiye, Israel, or other individual actors to impose their own unilateral agendas.

Israel has the advantage of being directly interested in the realisation of IMEC and GSI and being involved in both projects. With US support, it may also benefit from the cooperation of Arab partners in the region, even though the Gaza issue will persist. Cooperation is more beneficial for all actors involved, and projects such as IMEC and GSI encourage it, including through correlation with the Abraham Accords. This could eventually lead to the resolution of the Palestinian issue in a way that is satisfactory for all interested parties. The prospect of a special status for Saudi Arabia concerning the US could also encourage cooperation from this influential monarchy. The White House's Middle East team and Donald Trump himself seize every opportunity to affirm their commitment to the policy inaugurated during the first term of the current president. Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is itself part of this context.

Türkiye, on the other hand, seems to stick to its current agenda. As in the case of IMEC, Erdoğan's regime expresses hostility towards GSI as well. That is, even though Türkiye's



exclusion from the two projects is justified both by the fact that it is economically unfeasible for them to pass through Anatolia and by Ankara's very attitude and lack of cooperation. By insisting on using pretexts related to the Turkish entity in Northern Cyprus, which only Ankara recognises internationally, Türkiye cannot achieve anything about IMEC and GSI.

Post-Assad Syria, for its part, cannot fully embrace Türkiye's strategy in the long term because the current regime in Ankara has no solutions to offer regarding the normalisation of Damascus's foreign relations and the reconstruction of the country. These two objectives require resources far beyond the capacities of both countries, which only the West can provide in cooperation with its regional allies. Meanwhile, most Arab states in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf are already or are becoming, interested in advancing regional projects connecting the region to Europe and India through IMEC, with some of them already investing in this.

Furthermore, with few exceptions, most of these states are at least suspicious of Türkiye's policy in Syria and, generally, in the region. It is still uncertain whether Ankara has ceased for good its support for Islamist factions hostile to some Arab states, including but not limited to the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye's use of the Turkish entity in Northern Cyprus within its policy is also a delicate matter for most countries in the region, including but not limited to Cyprus and Greece. The occupation of significant areas in northern Iraq and Syria will remain, for the foreseeable future, as thorny an issue as it is now for the states in the region, especially the Arab ones. All these factors could ultimately contribute to moderating Ankara's ambitions in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The United States is directly interested in pacifying the region, including by connecting it to global markets and utilising the energy resources of the Eastern Mediterranean. All of this involves Israel and has multiple facets. From an economic standpoint, it brings prosperity. From a political standpoint, it brings stability and fits perfectly into the scenario inaugurated by the first Trump administration in 2020 through the Abraham Accords. The Biden administration has continued this approach and, looking long-term, has taken further steps showing that it sees the Republic of Cyprus as an increasingly important factor for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Türkiye's policy and other developments in the region seem to bring the US even closer to Cyprus.

The vulnerability of the island to Ankara has increased, given that Erdoğan's regime seems to have definitively abandoned the solution of a unified Cypriot state with two ethnically defined federal entities. Instead, it insists on the idea of an independent Turkish state in the



north and is trying to gain recognition for it, for example, within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. There, the entity already has observer status under the name of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. However, the strategic importance of the island has increased under the current conditions. It is no coincidence that, for a time, with encouragement from Athens, there was talk of the Republic of Cyprus joining NATO after its accession to the EU. Given that Ankara would certainly have opposed this, the alternative was for Washington to offer the status of a "major non-NATO ally". Until the finalisation of this process, the Republic of Cyprus is already included on the list of eligible countries for participation in military exercises and training programs offered by the United States for Eastern Europe. Moreover, a team from the US Air Force, based in Germany, visited the Andreas Papandreu Air Base in Paphos for an assessment regarding interoperability with US forces (Gregoriades 2024; Gregoriades 2025).

The increasing attention given to the Republic of Cyprus is justified, alongside the arguments listed above, by its position on the two major projects outlined here. Regarding IMEC, the island will be located on its Mediterranean route, serving as a commercial actor as well as a logistics hub for various goods. As for the transfer of energy from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe, Cyprus's role is even more important. First, the country will be a major consumer, currently lacking resources. Cyprus's economic competitiveness is also low due to the current energy problem, making its market vulnerable to investments, such as those from Russia, which have proven to be malignant in some cases. Second, investors and experts believe that Cyprus's geographical position can help make the electricity transfer to Europe via Crete and Mainland Greece more profitable. Cyprus is simply closer to Crete than Israel or Egypt. Additionally, in just 2-3 years, the island will be able to contribute its electricity based on gas. All of this is further complemented by the island's evident strategic value as a "fixed aircraft carrier" for the projection of Western deterring forces and for hosting refugees in the event of serious crises in the Middle East.

It is no coincidence that the United Kingdom did not relinquish its two military bases at Akrotiri and Dhekelia. The United States also took advantage of Nicosia's distancing from Moscow in recent years to strengthen and expand its footprint on the island. Steps in this direction were taken as early as 2022 when the Biden administration lifted the arms embargo on Cypriot purchases of US military equipment. This was followed by the signing of a framework cooperation agreement between Cyprus and the US in September 2024 in Nicosia,

covering humanitarian, climate, and security crises (Associated Press 2024). Then, in January 2025, one of the final decisions of the Biden administration was to solidify the lifting of the embargo from 2022 by explicitly including the Republic of Cyprus on the list of countries that can purchase arms and benefit from assistance and training provided by the US, a decision with potentially major effects in the Middle East (Iddon 2025).⁴

The government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reacted the very next day. It condemned the decision of the White House, calling it “a grave mistake”, and stated that Türkiye, “as the Motherland and a Guarantor State... will continue to support the efforts of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus to improve its defence and deterrence capabilities” (Dincel 2025). The tone of the statement above expresses Ankara’s long-standing attitude towards any Western, European, or American involvement in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye considers this vast region to be its sphere of influence, especially after the “victory in Damascus” against the Assad regime.

However, the composition of the new team at the White House could prove problematic for Ankara. The Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, and the President's senior security advisor, Michael Waltz, have a long history of harsh statements against Erdoğan's rule, placing it alongside other authoritarian regimes (Paternoster 2024; US Senate 2021). The new ambassador to Ankara, Tom Barrack, is a longtime friend of Donald Trump and his Lebanese origins, business dealings, and career path have always kept him closer to the interests of the powerful Arab monarchies in the Middle East, rather than Turkish interests (Bazail-Eimil 2024). The US President’s Special Envoy for the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, and his deputy, Morgan Ortagus, are known for their closeness to Israel and their willingness to promote Donald Trump’s policy in the region. The US President has never made a secret of the fact that he favours and relies on Israel to solve problems in the Middle East according to his administration's interests. It is important to highlight that Ortagus was also deeply involved in the conception and negotiations of the Abraham Accords.

The latest statements from the White House indicate that it remains committed to this direction. Witkoff recently stated that Syria and Lebanon could soon be part of those accords

⁴ See „Memorandum on the Eligibility of the Republic of Cyprus to Receive Defense Articles and Defense Services Under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the Arms Export Control Act”, US Embassy Nicosia, January 15, <https://cy.usembassy.gov/memorandum-on-the-eligibility-of-the-republic-of-cyprus-to-receive-defense-articles-and-defense-services-under-the-foreign-assistance-act-of-1961-and-the-arms-export-control-act/> (accessed 27th of February 2025).



(Stein 2025). Thus, we have significant indications that the effort to complete the Abraham Accords process will continue and may include other countries, culminating even in a tripartite agreement between Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia. In exchange for recognition and normalisation of relations with Israel, such an agreement would grant Riyadh a special status in its relationship with the US, probably similar to the one given to Israel, Japan, or South Korea (Chivvis, Miller, and Geaghan Breiner 2023; Mateescu 2024a). Cyprus remains part of the equation of solutions in the region, both from the EU and US perspectives. In a recent phone conversation, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio assured the Cypriot Foreign Minister that he appreciates the country for “the important role it plays in the Eastern Mediterranean and the assistance it provided for the evacuation of American citizens from conflict zones.” According to the official statement from the US Department of State, among the topics discussed were the energy projects in the region and “continued military cooperation” (US Department of State 2025).

Finally, one must not overlook the possibility that Iran and Russia could take advantage of any form of destabilisation, including the resurgence of Islamist militancy, to resume contacts and reestablish their influence in the region, especially in Syria. Some uprisings against the Sharaa regime in Damascus have already been incited by Iranian clerics in Latakia and Tartus. Türkiye has accused Iran of being involved in these episodes, as well as for its alleged support for the PKK in recent years (Türkiye Today 2025). Russia, for its part, is trying to maintain some aviation elements in its base in Syria and continues to be the source of the money it prints for the current regime in Damascus, just as it did for Bashar al-Assad (Durham 2025). Cooperation is necessary to prevent the return of the destabilising influence of Iran and Russia in the region, including through the resurgence of religious militancy under the banner of the Islamic State. As with the two major regional development projects analysed here, the states that contribute positively to the cooperation efforts will benefit, while those that undermine them will most likely lose.

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