

What's the Conflict Between Greece and Turkey All About?

By [Brandon Turbeville](#)

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The majority of people tend to think of the concept of history as if it is something relegated only to the past. As if they are not living through what will become history in the future. Doing so allows them to maintain a thought process that convinces them that world wars and European wars, in general, are over.

After all, Europe learned its lesson in the Big One - *and* the Big One after that. Of course, with any such incident, [there's history, and there's what actually happened](#).

If things between Greece and Turkey don't cool down, a European/Mediterranean war will ensue.

Such a war would not be merely European but Euro-Asian and, at its furthest reach, global.

With Recep Tayyip Erdogan's neo-Ottoman desires at the forefront, Turkey is expanding its national borders, with what Erdogan seems to believe will resurrect the Ottoman Empire. From Iraq to Syria and Libya, Turkey has attempted to either gain territory or forcefully make a seat at the international table through military action. Now, however, Turkey is threatening Greece as well and, as a result, Europe.

Turkey's actions may well result in a global confrontation if cooler heads do not prevail. Political motives and deep state intrigue are not allowed to repeat themselves as they did in the first World War. Anyone who offers a so-called "perfect solution" is often [using difficult times to take more control](#).

A brief history of the current conflict

Greek and Turkish relations have, for the most part, always been tense. Some brief historical context helps to understand the historical antipathy held toward one another by Greece and Turkey, at least at the national level.

As Victor Davis Hanson wrote for FOX News in his article "[Turkey vs. Greece - here's why this centuries-old rivalry matters now](#),"

Turkey is a Muslim country and was once the Ottoman Empire that ruled much of the Islamic world. Greece is still surrounded by Muslim countries.

Turks are quick to remind everyone that from the late 15th Century to the early 19th Century, most of Greece and the Aegean Islands belonged to the Ottoman Empire.

In modern times, after the bitterness over the Cyprus crisis of 1974 and years of socialist governments, Greece was vehemently anti-American despite shared Western traditions.

In contrast, Turkey once prided itself on its secular customs institutionalized by its first modern, pro-Western president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. His successors until recently were pro-American autocrats.

Now, geostrategic relations have flipped. Both nations remain NATO members, but Greece, not Turkey, is also a member of the European Union. Turkish northern Cyprus is largely considered a rogue territory, while democratic Greek Cyprus is an EU member.

Moreover, Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become an increasingly Islamic state, often hostile to the U.S. It likes to leverage its NATO membership to advance its new Middle East agendas.

It is Turkey, not Greece, that has been acting provocatively on the world stage. It recently refashioned the iconic Hagia Sophia cathedral, built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century-long one of the most iconic churches of the Christian world – from a museum into a mosque.

The tensions between Greece and Turkey are primarily over energy and territorial rights

However, those tensions carry with them quite a bit of baggage. This baggage is not only historical but also relatively recent. That is what makes the issue so dangerous.

Turkey and Greece both have overlapping claims to areas in the Eastern Mediterranean that are rich with gas. Greece argues that each of its thousands of islands is entitled to its own continental shelf and their own exclusive Greek drilling rights.

But Turkey disagrees

Turkey argues that Greece's claims are an unrealistic interpretation of international law and encroach upon Turkey's exclusive economic zone.

This disagreement [came to a head](#) when Turkey began seismic tests in the Mediterranean Sea in areas Greece claims as its territorial waters. Greece was angered and dispatched its armed forces to the area, but Turkey still went ahead with the tests.

On August 14, Greek and Turkish warships were involved in a "[minor collision](#)" due to the standoff that Greece described as an accident, but Turkey predictably labeled a "provocation."

Both sides continue to warn that they are not afraid of outright war

The EU supports Greece and has gone so far as to sanction Turkey for the seismic surveys off the Northern Cypriot coast, warning Turkey against any further provocations. There are also several other factors contributing to the Greek/Turkish friction. First, there is the question of the massive number of immigrants Turkey has held and used as a battering ram and bargaining chip with the rest of Europe.

In previous articles, I wrote at the height of the migrant push into Europe how Turkey was [directing migrants' flow](#) and intentionally [selecting specific types of migrants](#) (those of a

more fundamentalist variety) to send abroad. Greece was, of course, one of the heaviest hit when Erdogan “opened the gates.”

In July of this year, Turkey announced the [re-conversion of Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia](#) into a mosque. This re-conversion enraged a sizeable amount of the Greek population. Religious tensions and a centuries-old debate reignited.

Despite Turkey’s clear aggression in the Mediterranean, [Joseph Hincks of TIME writes](#),

Turkey’s muscular approach to the contested waters enjoys bipartisan support. Turkey’s main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), voiced support for the Mediterranean drilling program. Securing lucrative energy resources in a region where Turkey finds itself increasingly isolated also enjoys popular social backing, experts say. “Erdogan’s adventure in the Eastern Mediterranean probably has more support than any of his other regional adventures,” says Emile Hokayem, a Middle East security expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The other players

The friction between Greece and Turkey affects many more countries than just the leading two players. For instance, the European Union as a whole is at risk of being drawn into a confrontation not only between an EU member and a powerful Asian nation but between two members of NATO.

While that might sound like bad news for Turkey, this puts the EU itself at risk of confrontation between member states in a coalition centered around whose interests lie with Turkey, Greece, or some other effected third-party nation.

You don’t need to look far to see how this could happen either

[French President Emmanuel Macron](#) has publicly stated that France will play a larger role in international affairs. Most likely due to his incredibly weakened and failing status at home (another article, another time).

Now, France is becoming involved in the Greek-Turkey row, publicly criticizing Turkey, demanding that it remove its ships and even placing French fighter jets in Cyprus as a deterrent. France indicates that it will sell several French jets to Greece, all moves that anger Turkey.

Even Jacques Attali is getting in on the action. “We have to hear what Turkey says,” he writes, “take it very seriously and be prepared to act by all means. If our predecessors had taken the Führer’s speeches seriously from 1933 to 1936, they could have prevented this monster from the accumulating the means to do what he did.”

But the EU is not necessarily unified in its view of the conflict

Germany has tried to sound neutral but has long ties with Turkey if for no other reason than the massive number of Turkish immigrants in Germany and the large Turkish community. Germany is now attempting to act as a mediator between the two parties by offering Turkey

an “enhanced customs union” with the EU. Spain and Italy seem to be following Germany’s lead in that direction also.

Patrick Wintour has written an interesting for The Guardian about this standoff entitled, [“How A Rush For Mediterranean Gas Threatens To Push Greece And Turkey Into A War,”](#) where he says the following:

An increasingly fractious standoff over access to gas reserves has transformed a dispute between Turkey and [Greece](#) that was once primarily over Cyprus into one that now ensnares Libya, Israel, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and feeds into other political issues in the Mediterranean and has raised fears of a naval conflict between the two Nato allies in the Aegean Sea.

The crisis has been deepening in recent months with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, leading those inside the EU opposing Turkey’s increasingly military foreign policy and saying Turkey can no longer be seen as partner in the Mediterranean. He has offered French military support to the Greek prime minister, [Kyriakos Mitsotakis](#), including the possible sale of 18 Rafale jets.

The issue was on the agenda of a meeting of the Med7 group of southern Mediterranean leaders on the French island of Corsica on Thursday and again at an EU council meeting on September 23 that will discuss imposing severe sanctions on the already struggling Turkish banking sector over its demand for access to large swaths of the eastern Mediterranean.

[Germany](#), the lead mediator between Turkey and Greece, is exploring an enhanced customs union between Turkey and the EU to calm the dispute, which has been exacerbated by vast hydrocarbon discoveries over the past decade in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey has long sought a broader customs union with the EU, and although Greece might see any such offer as a reward for bullying, Germany believes both carrots and sticks are needed to persuade [Turkey](#) to change its strategy.

But Germany is also warning Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that his current unilateral strategy is a commercial dead end, since no private gas company is going to touch cooperation with Turkey if it is trying to exploit illegal claims on gas reserves.

Macron has already increased the French naval presence in the sea and called for the withdrawal of the Turkish reconnaissance ship Oruç Reis, accompanied by Turkish naval ships. The ship is undertaking seismic surveys in Greek waters south of Cyprus.

The fear that the conflict could spiral out of control has led to an urgent search for a neutral arbitrator and an agreed agenda for talks. An effort by Nato to start technical naval deconfliction talks was delayed after Greece objected to Nato’s involvement. The Greek foreign minister, Nikos Dendias, insisted that the talks would start only when the threats stopped. He then flew to New York to enlist the help of the UN secretary-general, António Guterres.

There are more players for no other reason than energy exploration.

The size of the reserves for which Turkey is attempting to lay claim inspired Israel, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine form an East Med Gas forum to develop a plan to extract and export gas from the same region.

France wants to join that forum, and the UAE is a supporter as well. This forum has effectively created an anti-Turkish coalition (though Italy's position is less clear) regarding this conflict.

There is even more to the story, particularly regarding the Libyan question.

Initially, many thought that the Turkish intervention in the Libyan civil war (following America and NATO's tragic war there) was merely Erdogan acting out. Erdogan had other ideas, most notably a maritime treaty that he was rewarded with for his support by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).

Of course, Turkey supports the GNA and has become involved militarily and by proxy in support of that government while Russia, UAE, Egypt, and France are supporting Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

Pro-LNA members have some concerns.

Turkey's newfound maritime treaty with the GNA gives Turkey drilling rights and essentially ignores Crete's existence, contradicting all previously understood Greek and Cypriot drilling rights.

Thus, Egypt and Greece have now signed a maritime agreement that Turkey has labeled null and void. Egypt's al-Sisi has even gone so far as to threaten to intervene militarily against Turkey in Libya, now putting those two countries in a place where the possibility of a direct military confrontation is a very real one, not to mention a conflict between each of their allies.

The UAE has already [sent a number of US-manufactured jets](#) to Libya and has [taken part in military drills](#) with Greece off Crete's island.

And Russia's role?

Joseph Hincks writes,

Russia has yet to make a public statement on the Greece-Turkey tensions but it is deeply entrenched in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where Erdogan recently announced [Turkey's biggest ever gas find](#). The U.S. Navy's top admiral in Europe [warned last year](#) that Moscow is in the process of turning the eastern Mediterranean into one of the world's most militarized zones, in part as a result of building up a naval hub at the Syrian port of Tartus. Greek media [reported](#) this week that the Russian Navy has gathered nine military vessels between Cyprus and Syria, including three submarines.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should. Just before World War 1, a tangled mess of alliances had been [created](#) by a perfect [mix of cunning by some nations](#) and a dose of folly by others to result in one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th Century.^[1]

World War 1 led to the Russian Revolution's tragedies, the rise of Adolph Hitler, and World War 2, where the order was re-invented yet again. Now, that order is being challenged but not in a way that will result in greater freedom and prosperity for the world's people. Indeed,

it will result in quite the opposite.

There is no way to predict whether or not the Greek-Turkish row will become a military clash or even a war, much less a global one. But the puzzle pieces are there and slowly being put together just as they were over a hundred years ago.

The odds are that it won't happen. But then again, the odds were that it wouldn't happen the first time.

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*Brandon Turbeville writes for TheOrganicPrepper.com and his own website, BrandonTurbeville.com He is the author of ten books, *Codex Alimentarius — The End of Health Freedom*, *7 Real Conspiracies*, *Five Sense Solutions* and *Dispatches From a Dissident*, volume 1 and volume 2, *The Road to Damascus: The Anglo-American Assault on Syria*, *The Difference It Makes: 36 Reasons Why Hillary Clinton Should Never Be President*, and *Resisting The Empire: The Plan To Destroy Syria And How The Future Of The World Depends On The Outcome*. His books can be found in the bookstore at BrandonTurbeville.com and on [Amazon](http://Amazon.com).*

Note

[1] Massey, Robert K. Nicholas and Alexandra: *An Intimate Account Of The Last Of The Romanovs And The Fall Of Imperial Russia*. Atheneum, 1967; Ballantine Books, 2000

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Articles by: [Brandon Turbeville](#)

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