

Turkey-Greece crisis talks: An exercise in minimal expectations

Tue, 2021-02-02 21:40

WASHINGTON D.C.: After a tumultuous four years of Donald Trump's rule, Joe Biden has entered the White House with a packed domestic agenda, not least the ongoing pandemic and its economic repercussions but also the gnawing issue of race relations. As such, one might expect Biden to place America's foreign relations on the backburner, at least for the time being.

However, Biden has a strong track record on high-level diplomacy, chalking up several years of engagement with America's friends and foes, projecting US national interests abroad. Now that he has assumed the highest office in the land, he has pledged to restore America's image on the world stage.

Coincidentally, Biden's tenure began just days before long-awaited talks between Greece and Turkey took place in Istanbul – the latest in the protracted territorial dispute which has long threatened the peace of the Mediterranean Sea.



A handout photo released by the Greek National Defence Ministry on August 26, 2020 shows ships of the Hellenic Navy taking part in a military exercise in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, on August 25, 2020. (AFP/Greek Defense Ministry/File Photo)

Delayed by several months, and following a relative easing of tensions, talks between Greece and Turkey are, on the surface at least, an exercise in minimal expectations. Exploratory talks resumed after a pause of five years, picking up where they left off in 2016.

Little progress toward normalizing relations was made between 2002 to 2016, during which time some 60 rounds of talks took place. There is little sign things will be any different this time around.

However, Biden is not Trump. He will need very little time getting up to speed on the dispute in the eastern Mediterranean and his active involvement in the State Department's handling of the issue is beyond doubt.

TURKEY-GREECE MARITIME BORDER DISPUTE

■ Continental plate and Turkish exclusive economic zone (EEZ), according to Ankara
— Greek EEZ
— Cypriot EEZ



Furthermore, Biden will end the Trump-era practice of direct diplomacy between the White House and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, preferring instead to act through the standard institutional channels.

Greece has reason to feel optimistic about the US stance. Biden has on numerous occasions endorsed the Greek position on de-escalation, solving outstanding issues through dialogue and recourse to international law. He is also a supporter of the religious rights of the Greek minority in Turkey, and especially of the role of the patriarchate in Istanbul.

By any measure, Greek-US relations are at their peak, having been strengthened during the Trump years and made stronger through multiple agreements on trade and mutual defense.

FASTFACT

Greece-Turkey

- * **11 Turkey's rank in Global Firepower military strength.**
- * **29 Greece's rank in Global Firepower military strength.**
- * **\$18.2b Turkey's annual military budget.**
- * **\$7b Greece's annual military budget.**

Biden has also surrounded himself with seasoned diplomats and advisers who worked with him during his eight-year tenure as Barack Obama's vice president, and whose concern for peace and stability in the region is echoed in Greek rhetoric and policy initiatives.

By contrast, a big question mark hangs over Washington's Turkey file. Ankara's flourishing relationship with Moscow and its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system has led to US sanctions that Biden will be in no hurry to lift.

Turkey's position in NATO has been weakened, leaving member states including France questioning its reliability. Indeed, Washington considers the presence of S-400s on Turkish soil as a threat to its F-35 fighter jets and to NATO defense systems in general.

This is not the only issue blighting the bilateral relationship. Ankara continues to complain about the perceived US role in the 2016 coup attempt and rejects US charges levelled against its state-owned Halkbank concerning its alleged role in helping Iran evade US sanctions.



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (R) shake hands in front of the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (C) during a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the NATO summit at the Grove hotel in Watford, northeast of London. (AFP/Murat Cetinmuhurda/Turkish Presidential Press Service/File Photo)

More telling still is the view which emerged from talks between Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, and Bjoern Seibert, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's cabinet chief, who "agreed to work together on issues of mutual concern, including China and Turkey," according to a White House statement.

Linking Turkey with China, the main US geopolitical adversary, is a blow to Erdogan's hopes of a close relationship with the new Biden administration.

If the US chooses to get involved in the Greece-Turkey dispute, Athens rightly expects to reap the rewards. Yet it would be premature to assume the Biden administration will automatically apply pressure on Turkey.

Firstly, the exploratory talks are informal and require no mediation. Talking directly to one another, even if disagreements are substantial, is preferable to having external sponsors.

Secondly, Turkey is currently trying to recalibrate its relations with the West as well as countries closer to home, including the Gulf states and Israel. The US is likely to give Turkey the benefit of the doubt, at least in the initial stages of the new administration, and give it time to prove its willingness for constructive cooperation.

Thirdly, for all of Turkey's recent acts of bravado, the country remains a potentially critical ally for the US in an intensely volatile region. Not only does Turkey possess NATO's second largest army, it also has the strategic positioning to act as a brake on Russia's ambitions in the Middle East, particularly in Syria.

By the time talks concluded on Jan 25, a few facts stood out.



Turkish President and leader of the Justice and Development (AK) Party Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a parliamentary group meeting on January 27, 2021 at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) in Ankara. (AFP/File Photo)

Although the talks were intended to take place at a merely technical level, the Turkish delegation included Erdogan's trusted advisor Ibrahim Kalin. The move was likely designed to underscore Turkey's sincerity in bringing the talks to a successful conclusion, a message that its foreign minister communicated to EU officials the previous day.

Another interesting fact is that both sides followed standard practice by not revealing the content of their talks. This is largely a positive sign, since press leaks are usually aimed at shifting the blame onto the opposite side and undermining prospects for a positive result.

More encouraging still, Greece and Turkey have agreed to proceed with the next round of talks in March, this time in Athens.

Washington, just like Brussels, welcomed the talks and highlighted the importance of dialogue between the two sides. Confirming its attempt to adopt

an equidistant approach, the US will continue to encourage both Athens and Ankara to resolve at least some of their disputes.

For Greece, these are limited and specific: the determination of the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea and the delimitation of the two countries' respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

For Turkey, on the other hand, the list includes issues such as minority rights, the demilitarization of the Greek Dodecanese islands and the alignment of Greece's sea borders on the Aegean (6 miles) with its airspace in the same region (10 miles).



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has reason to be optimistic about the US stance during the Biden administration. (AFP/File Photo)

What is certain, save for any big surprises, is the US (and the EU) will refrain from further sanctions on Turkey.

Pre-existing problems pertaining to the Aegean dispute and the Cyprus problem, the primary issues of contention for many decades, have recently been compounded by zero-sum games on hydrocarbon exploration in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as the migrant and refugee crisis, fueled further by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fact that other states with interests in the region, such as Cyprus, Israel, France, Italy, Libya and Egypt, are now part of the larger Eastern Mediterranean dispute raises the stakes and pushes Greece and Turkey to adopt maximalist positions.

For all of Washington's desire to see normalization, it is highly unlikely that concrete progress will be made in the coming months.

Twitter: [@dimitsar](https://twitter.com/dimitsar)





Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Greece](#)

[Editor's Choice](#)

Greece, France to sign \$2.8 billion fighter jet deal amid Turkey tensions
Turkey and Greece resume talks to resolve maritime disputes

[Syria flooding destroys schools, refugee camps](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-02 21:15

LONDON: A week of heavy flooding in northwest Syria has destroyed some 120 schools and swept away tents in refugee camps.

Over 21,000 children and more than 980 education personnel have been affected by the floods, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which said its current assessment falls short of the total damage caused because many areas remain inaccessible.

With more than 2 million children of school age in northwest Syria – roughly half of them internally displaced due to the war – the education system in the region is severely strained.

“The most basic thing needed in northwest Syria is the political will to help children recover from the conflict,” Amjad Yamin, the advocacy and campaigns director for Save the Children, told Arab News.

“There’s the easy way of funding education more – which is distinctly underfunded, with 75 percent of what’s being requested not being met – but there’s also a need to put funding toward infrastructure. There just aren’t enough buildings in northwest Syria for the people there,” he said.

“We’re regularly left trying to make a choice between moving families living in buildings into tents so they can host schools, or hosting schools in tents, neither of which is a solution. Unless there’s some serious investment in infrastructure, we’re going to continue to see the same cycle every winter,” he added.

“More humanitarian access is needed in northwest Syria. Four million people rely on it, but the UN Security Council only allows one border crossing for humanitarian aid. We need to remove these restrictions – which are blocking a lot of what charities can do – and we need to improve funding for access to

services.”

Heavy rains in the Afrin province of northwest Syria have swept away dozens of tents in recent days.

Mark Cutts, the UN deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria, said last week: “I am deeply concerned about the devastating impact that the recent floods have had on displaced people living in camps in northwest Syria.”

He added: “Just last year, 1 million people in this area were displaced by fighting. Many of them are still living under olive trees on roadsides, as there are simply not enough camps for all these people. The international response has not matched the scale of the crisis.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Syria floods](#)

[refugee camps](#)

Suffering of Syrians escalates amid flooding and aid shortagesUN Security Council bickers as Syrians continue to suffer

Cairo to host Palestinian faction talks

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-02 20:58

CAIRO: Egypt has sent official invitations to the Palestinian factions to visit Cairo on Feb. 7 and start a comprehensive national dialogue.

Both Hamas and Fatah announced their intention to participate in the dialogue in order to sign a charter of honor to hold the Palestinian elections on time and to abide by their results.

Representatives of the Palestinian factions will arrive in the Egyptian capital for the talks.

Officials in the two largest Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas, said in statements that the Cairo meetings, which will last for several days, will focus on contentious issues and search for consensus.

Fatah officials said the dialogue will focus on mechanisms for the success of the Palestinian elections scheduled for the middle of this year.

Last month, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for legislative elections on May 22 and presidential elections on July 31.

These will be the first legislative elections since 2006 and presidential elections since 2005.

"The delegations participating in the dialogue will arrive in Cairo on Feb. 7 and the comprehensive national dialogue will start the following day," Maj. Gen. Jibril Rajoub, secretary of the Fatah Central Committee, said in a statement.

"We will go to the Cairo dialogue, as President Mahmoud Abbas said, with open minds, in order to reach the results that our Palestinian people wish for," he added.

Taher Al-Nono, media adviser to the president of Hamas, said in a statement that the head of the movement's political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, received an official invitation from Egypt to attend the dialogue with a delegation.

"The leadership of the movement decided that Saleh Al-Arouri, deputy head of the political bureau, would lead the movement's delegation participating in the dialogue," Al-Nono added.

The call for dialogue comes at a time when the Palestinian issue is undergoing a breakthrough, with US President Joe Biden's assertion of the US commitment to achieving peace in the Middle East on the basis of the two-state solution.

Al-Arouri explained that the delegations of the Palestinian factions will begin arriving in Cairo to start the dialogue and discuss holding Palestinian elections, at the level of the Legislative Council, the presidency and the National Council.

He stressed Hamas' adherence to overcoming obstacles and having elections in a way that achieves the supreme interest of the Palestinian people.

" Hamas is ready for the Cairo dialogues," he added.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Cairo](#)

[Palestinian factions](#)

'Historic' Palestinian factions' reconciliation meeting puts smiles on faces
Sisi and Abu Dhabi crown prince discuss Israel deals and energy during
Cairo meeting

[Egypt to link 9 countries with the largest road in Africa](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-02 02:19

CAIRO: Egyptian Minister of Transport Kamel Al-Wazir said that Egypt is adopting a vast infrastructure plan to link nine African countries, including Sudan, with the largest land road in Africa.

During a plenary session of the Egyptian parliament, Al-Wazir confirmed that the development of the project, including the road and railway systems, aims to create a route from Salloum to Benghazi, explaining that this supports Egyptian industry and labor and contributes to the transport of goods to Libya.

“There was coordination with Chad regarding whether the route passes from Sudan or Libya, and we settled on starting from Libya, then Chad and then Congo,” Al-Wazir said.

He added that the development of the railway system comes in parallel with the establishment of the express electric train, explaining that the systems used in the railways aim to achieve safety and avoid human errors.

The minister confirmed that the Egyptian state is making great efforts to develop land and dry ports, indicating that a comprehensive plan has been prepared to establish 13 ports and a logistical center.

The new Egyptian ports aim to facilitate internal and external trade movement, support the Egyptian economy, prevent the accumulation of goods and containers in sea ports and achieve integration between means of transportation.

The minister said that in total, 35 projects were planned, with a total cost of 15 billion Egyptian pounds (\$951,000). Nine projects have already been completed at a total cost of 300 million pounds, the most important of which is the construction of the Qustul land port at a cost of 79 million pounds, the Arqin land port at (93 million pounds), and development of the Taba land port (40 million pounds).



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

UAE imports \$2.9bn in non-oil goods from Egypt in 2020
Egypt receives 50,000 AstraZeneca jab doses from India

[Lebanon hits Daesh terror cell in border town](#)

Tue, 2021-02-02 01:26

BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces said on Monday they had smashed a Daesh terrorist cell operating near the border with Syria. Eighteen Lebanese and Syrian nationals were arrested and a large quantity of weapons and ammunition was seized in an intelligence operation in the border town of Aarsal, the Armed Forces Command said. Those arrested "belong to cells linked to the terrorist organization Daesh" and had been "planning to carry out terrorist acts," a military spokesman said.

Meanwhile the Iran-backed Hezbollah group said it had shot down an Israeli drone after it flew over the UN-demarcated Blue Line border in southern Lebanon. The group released images of a four-armed drone equipped with what appeared to be a camera.

The Israeli military admitted that the drone had come down, but claimed it had crashed. "There is no risk of breach of information," it said.

Hezbollah said in September 2019 that it would shoot down any Israeli drones flying over Lebanon after an incident the previous month when two drones packed with explosives targeted Hezbollah's stronghold in south Beirut. In August 2020, the group shot down and seized an Israeli drone that flew into Lebanese airspace. Israel again said at the time that the drone had "fallen."

Last week the Israeli army shot down an unmanned aircraft it said had entered its airspace from southern Lebanon.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Daesh](#)

UK jets destroy Daesh cells in Iraq
Top Daesh figure in Iraq killed: prime minister