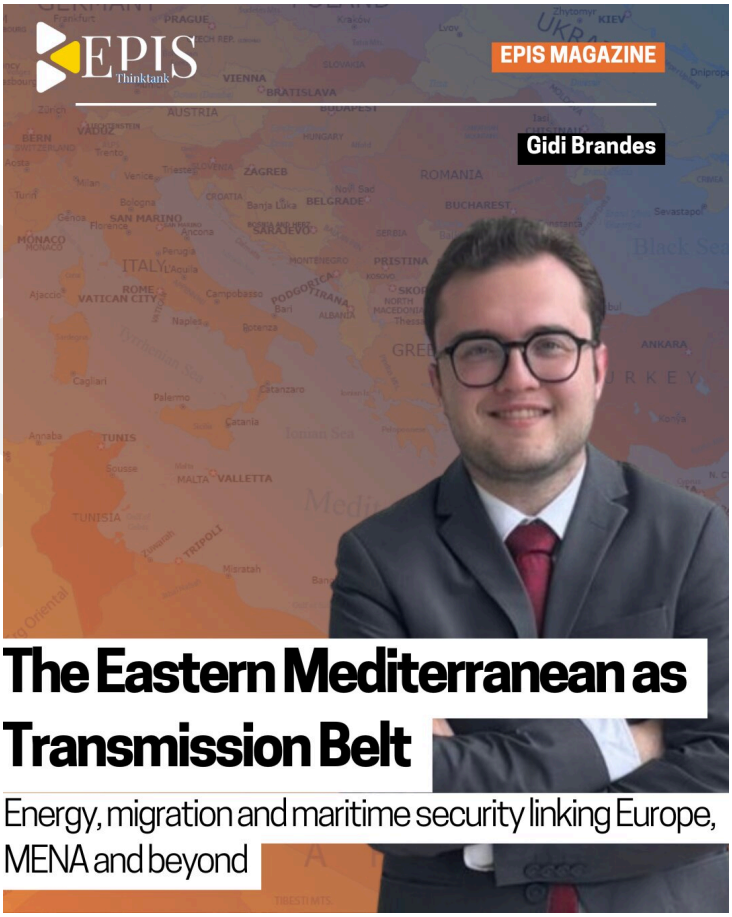
The Eastern Mediterranean as Transmission Belt

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The Eastern Mediterranean as a Systemic Geopolitical Region: Transmission, Power, and Strategic Neglect

This article asks why a region that structurally links multiple geopolitical systems remains persistently underdiscussed, and what strategic risks arise from this neglect. It argues that the Eastern Mediterranean's role as a transmission belt can only be captured through a systemic geopolitical analysis inspired by Mazis, followed by a strategic reflection on spillover dynamics. The central claim is that the region's risks do not stem from dominance by any single actor, but from the interaction of partially stabilized sub-

systems embedded in wider geopolitical architectures. As later sections show, this systemic role is consistently overlooked by dominant theoretical frameworks, fragmented policy ownership, and media narratives ill-suited to slow-moving, multi-domain power configurations.

Geopolitical-Strategic Analysis of the Eastern Mediterranean

Why Mazi's Framework Fits the Eastern Mediterranean

For the purposes of this analysis, the Eastern Mediterranean refers to the maritime basin and adjoining coastal states encompassing Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and the Levantine coast (Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories), together with the maritime corridors linking the Black Sea and the Red Sea. This definition emphasizes functional connectivity rather than cultural or historical boundaries.

Mazis' systemic geopolitical framework is particularly suited to the Eastern Mediterranean because the region functions as a nexus of overlapping systems where reductionist or state-centric approaches fail to capture interdependencies. The framework enables a structured analysis of power across sub-systemic, systemic, and supra-systemic levels, revealing dynamics that conventional bilateral or state-centric approaches miss, most notably how actions in one basin (e.g. Libya or Syria) reshape energy, migration, and security balances across others. In doing so, it reframes the Eastern Mediterranean not as a theatre of isolated disputes, but as a system whose coherence derives from interaction rather than proximity.

The Eastern Mediterranean operates simultaneously at multiple scales: at the sub-systemic level, localized clusters such as Greece–Cyprus–Israel or Turkey–Libya structure specific rivalries and alignments; at the system level, overlapping EEZs, energy corridors, and naval presence bind coastal states into a single maritime arena; and at the supra-systemic level, EU security policy, Black Sea dynamics, and Red Sea shipping routes embed the region in wider geopolitical architectures (IISS, 2024; Proedrou, 2023). This layered system reflects the region's hybrid character, where maritime energy spaces intersect with terrestrial conflicts and external power projection, requiring an analytical model capable of accommodating such multiplicity (Tziarras, 2019a).

Mazis' strict separation between analysis and prescription is particularly valuable in a region influenced by normative agendas. By prioritizing objective power mapping, the framework avoids policy bias and ideological framing (Ehteshami & Mohammadi, 2017). Power functions as the unifying variable, allowing energy, migration, conflict, and economic dynamics to be analysed as interconnected expressions of geopolitical influence rather than isolated security issues (Stergiou, 2019; IISS, 2024).

Definition of the Subject Matter

The core of the region includes Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and the Levantine coast (Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories).

Taken together, this is an area characterized by overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs), naval chokepoints, and hybrid security environments involving both state and non-state actors (IISS, 2024; Proedrou, 2023).

The internal area of the region consists of maritime spaces, coastal states, and offshore energy fields which structure intra-regional competition and cooperation (Stergiou, 2019). The external area extends beyond the basin to include the EU's security architecture, Gulf states' geo-economic outreach, the Black Sea system shaped by Turkey–NATO dynamics, and the Red Sea system linked via the Suez Canal and conflicts in Yemen (Dalay & Zoubir, 2025; Ghanem, 2025).

FIGURE 1: OFF Shore Natural Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Source: İşeri, E., & Bartan, A. Ç. (2019). Turkey's geostrategic vision and energy concerns in the Eastern Mediterranean security architecture: A view from Ankara. In Z. Tziarras (Ed.), The new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral partnerships and regional security (PRIO Report No. 3/2019, p. 117). Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

This does not imply energy determinism. In acute crisis moments, such as the Gaza war, Syrian escalation, or major naval confrontations, ideological drivers, regime survival, and military calculations can temporarily override energy considerations. These moments, however, tend to reconfigure rather than dissolve the underlying energy–maritime structure. Over the medium to long term, it is the maritime–energy interface that structures alignments, constrains escalation, and channels spillover across systems. Secondary dynamics such as military deployments, migration flows, and external power projection derive from this nexus, which simultaneously enables cooperative arrangements, such as Israel–Egypt energy interdependence, and fuels disputes, including Turkey's challenges to Cypriot EEZs (IISS, 2024; Tziarras, 2019b).

The following section identifies what holds the Eastern Mediterranean system together and how power is organized across its constituent levels.

Systemic Delimitation and Power Architecture

Sub-systems within the Eastern Mediterranean emerge as localized clusters of power interactions. The Israel–Egypt–Gaza sub-system revolves around energy-security interdependence: Israeli gas exports to Egypt help stabilize bilateral ties despite ongoing tensions in Gaza (IISS, 2024). The Greece–Cyprus–Israel maritime sub-system features formalized cooperation through trilateral mechanisms, focusing on EEZ alignments, joint naval exercises, and energy infrastructure coordination (Tsardanidis, 2019; Tziarras, 2019c). In contrast, the Turkey–Libya sub-system highlights assertive linkages, such as the 2019 maritime agreement, which enables Turkish interventions and counters rival claims (IISS, 2024). These sub-systems reveal how power is organized locally and mediated through energy and security interactions.

At the system level, the Eastern Mediterranean emerges as a maritime-centric geopolitical system structured around EEZs, energy corridors, and naval presence. EEZs allow states to assert resource claims but also produce overlapping disputes, as seen in Turkey's assertions against Greece and Cyprus (Proedrou, 2023). Energy routes underscore the region's connectivity and strategic leverage. Naval deployments, such as Russian bases in Syria, extend external power projection into the system (Kortunov, 2025). This system-level view captures the aggregate effect of sub-system interactions and highlights structural tensions. It also explains why incremental confidence-building measures rarely translate into lasting regional stabilization.

At the supra-system level, the Eastern Mediterranean is embedded in broader architectures. The EU security system externalizes its borders through migration and energy agreements (Megerisi, 2025). The Middle Eastern security system transmits conflicts arising from Iran–Saudi rivalries, shaping local alignments and crises (Ehteshami & Mohammadi, 2017). The global energy and maritime trade system links the Eastern Mediterranean to international markets, where disruptions in the Suez Canal have worldwide consequences (Ghanem, 2025). These supra-systemic connections amplify both vulnerability and strategic relevance.

The structuring factor of this analysis is the maritime–energy interface. It exists materially through offshore fields and transit routes, generates behaviours such as brinkmanship and alliance formation, and structures competitive interactions within and across sub-systems (Stergiou, 2023). Without this interface, the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be coherently treated as a system; it dissolves analytically into disparate sub-regions and episodic events. By anchoring analysis in this element, one can trace how localized, systemic, and supra-systemic dynamics interconnect in shaping regional power structures.

FIGURE 2: ALLIANCES, ALIGNMENTS AND COMPETITION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN. Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2024). Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, security and energy challenges [Strategic dossier]. Pp. 15. https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/strategic-dossier-preview-turbulence-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/

Sub-Systemic Power Trends

Positive sub-systemic trends refer to alignments that produce durable coordination mechanisms with independent momentum beyond crisis-driven alignment and measurably stabilize interactions at the system level, creating resilience beyond ad hoc cooperation. In the Greece–Cyprus–Israel sub-system, institutionalized cooperation through summits, joint military exercises, and energy agreements strengthens mutual security, fosters trilateral coordination, and counters revisionist maritime ambitions by Turkey (Tsardanidis, 2019; IISS, 2024). Energy pacts, particularly in natural gas development and export, further consolidate these alliances, creating

sustainable mechanisms for crisis management. Similarly, the Israel–Egypt sub-system benefits from deep energy interdependence, exemplified by agreements such as the 2022 maritime gas deal, which stabilizes bilateral relations despite ongoing challenges arising from Gaza spillovers and regional unrest (IISS, 2024; Stergiou, 2019). These arrangements constitute positive sub-systemic component trends, as they actively shape systemic dynamics and provide resilience within their respective sub-systems.

Zero or neutral trends refer to sustained activity that absorbs pressure or manages symptoms without altering the underlying configuration of power at the system level. The EU maintains a largely normative presence through mechanisms such as energy diversification policies, migration frameworks, and the Green Deal's renewable energy initiatives. Yet, weak operational coherence limits its influence to reactive, absorptive measures rather than systemic change (Florensa, 2018; Stergiou, 2023). Similarly, migration governance acts as a shock absorber, responding to pressures from conflicts in Syria and Libya while frequently externalizing responsibilities to neighbouring states, without fundamentally changing regional power structures (Megerisi, 2025; IISS, 2024).

Distinguishing internal versus external power effects clarifies the scope and locus of influence. Internal trends, such as Turkey's assertive, hybrid interventions in Libya and Syria, materially alter the system by linking disparate disputes, escalating maritime tensions, and creating structural dependencies that affect other sub-systems (İşeri & Bartan, 2019; IISS, 2024). Conversely, external trends such as China's Belt and Road Initiative investments or Russia's limited military footholds, remain largely contained: they enhance connectivity and provide leverage without establishing dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean system (Jin, 2025; Ghanem, 2025; Kortunov, 2025). Similarly, Gulf investments in infrastructure or energy sectors penetrate sub-systems opportunistically, offering influence but not hegemonizing regional dynamics (Ehteshami & Mohammadi, 2017).

Collectively, this mapping of positive, zero, internal, and external trends demonstrates how the Eastern Mediterranean exhibits pockets of stabilization, absorptive mechanisms, and external leverage. It highlights the nuanced, systemic interactions that shape the region. Understanding these sub-systemic dynamics is critical for assessing both the resilience of alliances and the vulnerabilities created by actors whose influence is partial, external, or conditional.

Synthesis

This multi-layered structure explains why actions that appear tactical at one level often generate strategic consequences at another. At the system level, the synthesis of sub-systemic trends points to fragmented stabilization. While regional actors such as Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt consolidate localized cooperation, external powers exert significant influence, preventing any single actor, including Turkey, from fully achieving strategic objectives amid political and military pushback (IISS, 2024). No

internal hegemon dominates the Eastern Mediterranean system, resulting in a delicate balance where regional initiatives coexist with structural constraints. At the supra-system level, the region functions as a transmission belt, linking multiple geopolitical spheres. External shocks, from the Ukraine conflict to tensions in Gaza, can propagate through energy, migration, and security networks, magnifying systemic vulnerabilities (Dalay & Zoubir, 2025). This structural assessment underscores the region's limited autonomy: it is neither fully independent nor entirely resilient, but highly responsive to broader regional and global dynamics. The Eastern Mediterranean thus exhibits stability without order and connectivity without integration.

Having established the system's structure, the analysis now turns to where and how instability spills beyond the basin.

Strategic Reflection

Spillover Potential of the Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean's systemic characteristics generate spillover potential across both geographical and sectoral domains. Spillover is not an anomaly in this system but a structural feature.

Geographically, spillover is most direct toward the EU through migration and energy channels. Protracted conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the Levant continue to generate refugee flows that disproportionately affect southern EU member states. Migration governance is frequently externalized through transactional arrangements, exposing Europe to political leverage. Most notably is Turkey's instrumentalization of migration in periods of bilateral tension (IISS, 2024; Megerisi, 2025). Energy interdependence reinforces this exposure. Although Eastern Mediterranean gas volumes are modest in global terms, they contribute to producer-state stability and offer partial diversification away from Russian supplies. Disruptions reverberate through European markets via price volatility, investor uncertainty, and stalled infrastructure development (Stergiou, 2019; Mason, 2025). Libya's persistent instability further increases these risks: foreign involvement by Turkey, Russia, and Egypt intensifies migration flows and energy insecurity, while allowing external actors to exploit governance vacuums along NATO's southern flank (Atlantic Council, 2025).

Spillover toward the Red Sea operates through shipping and maritime security linkages. The Eastern Mediterranean's energy–security nexus connects directly with critical chokepoints such as the Suez Canal. Since late 2023, Houthi attacks, have disrupted global shipping routes, forcing costly rerouting and raising insurance and transport costs (Ghanem, 2025). This connectivity enables tensions originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Iranian proxy activity in Lebanon and Syria, to translate into wider maritime insecurity. As a result, ambitions for alternative trade corridors, such as IMEC, and Egypt's canal revenues are placed at risk, with signif-

icant economic consequences for Europe–Asia trade (Ghanem, 2025). The region thus functions as a transmission belt for Middle Eastern shocks into the Red Sea system.

Spillover into the Black Sea occurs primarily through Turkey's role as a pivotal actor bridging maritime basins. Turkish assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean, illustrated by the Libya maritime agreement and military involvement in Syria, intersects with NATO dynamics in the Black Sea, where Russia's posture and the effects of the Ukraine war generate mutual vulnerabilities (IISS, 2024; Dalay & Zoubir, 2025). Control of the Turkish Straits and revisionist maritime claims amplify these linkages: Eastern Mediterranean disputes influence naval postures in the Black Sea, while energy competition, including Turkey's ambition to become a regional hub, intersects with EU diversification strategies amid Russian isolation (Proedrou, 2023). Recent EU strategic assessments explicitly recognize the danger of spillovers from Ukraine into the Black Sea and beyond (European Commission, 2025).

Sectoral spillovers reinforce these geographical dynamics. Energy competition exacerbates migration pressures as exclusionary energy arrangements and contested infrastructure heighten instability in fragile states such as Libya and Lebanon, producing displacement that Europe absorbs without systemic resolution (IISS, 2024; Megerisi, 2025). Conflict spillover into shipping and economic domains is evident in the implications of the Gaza war, which disrupted normalization trajectories, delayed energy projects, and undermined investor confidence. Simultaneously, security trends foster radicalization through Iranian networks and non-state actors, intensifying the region's external sensitivities (Mason, 2025; IISS, 2024). Together, these dynamics confirm that the Eastern Mediterranean's fragmented power trends and exposure to external forces make it a high-risk node in an increasingly multipolar geopolitical environment.

FIGURE 3: Potential Export Routes for Eastern Mediterranean Gas. Stergiou, A. (2019). Geopolitics and energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean: The formation of new "energy alliances." In Z. Tziarras (Ed.), The new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral partnerships and regional security (PRIO Report No. 3/2019, pp. 11–30). Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Why the Eastern Mediterranean is underdiscussed

The Eastern Mediterranean remains analytically underdiscussed despite its growing strategic centrality. This neglect is not accidental but stems from a combination of theoretical, policy, and media logics that struggle to accommodate the region's hybrid and multi-domain character.

Firstly, the Eastern Mediterranean fits poorly within dominant state-centric international relations paradigms. These frameworks privilege unitary actors and discrete conflicts, whereas the region is shaped by overlapping systems, transnational flows, and maritime-centric dynamics (Tziarras, 2019d; Florensa, 2018). Its geopolitics is structured around an

energy–security nexus, hybrid threats, and fluid interactions between state and non-state actors operating across internal and external arenas. As a result, the region is rarely conceptualized as a distinct geopolitical system, instead being subsumed under broader Middle Eastern conflict narratives or treated as a peripheral extension of EU maritime security (Proedrou, 2023; IISS, 2024).

Secondly, the Eastern Mediterranean is consistently overshadowed by higher-visibility crises, including the wars in the Middle East since 2023, the Black Sea theatre of the Ukraine war, and intensifying great-power competition, which absorb diplomatic attention and analytical resources (Dalay & Zoubir, 2025; Mason, 2025). Institutional fragmentation further dilutes focus: the EU emphasizes migration management and energy securitization without strategic integration; NATO prioritizes deconfliction over regional ownership; and MENA actors adopt predominantly bilateral, survival-driven approaches rather than systemic perspectives (Megerisi, 2025; IISS, 2024). No single actor or framework claims sustained responsibility for the region as a whole.

Thirdly, the absence of clear binaries, dominant hegemons, or decisive outcomes makes the Eastern Mediterranean difficult to narrate. The region lacks the narrative clarity found in Ukraine or Gaza, reducing sustained coverage and public visibility (Ehteshami & Mohammadi, 2017; IISS, 2024).

Together, these factors sustain underdiscussion, increasing the risk of strategic surprise as the region's systemic importance grows in an increasingly multipolar and interconnected international environment.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Eastern Mediterranean should be understood not as a peripheral or derivative arena, but as a systemic geopolitical region whose dynamics are shaped by the interaction of maritime space, energy infrastructures, security competition, and external power penetration. The study has demonstrated that the region operates across different levels, producing patterns of fragmented stabilization rather than hegemonic dominance. Localized cooperation coexists with persistent contestation and external leverage, preventing the emergence of a fully autonomous regional order.

The synthesis of power trends reveals an Eastern Mediterranean that functions as a strategic transmission belt, highly sensitive to shocks from the Middle East, the Black Sea, and global energy and maritime systems. Energy, migration, and security dynamics do not remain confined within the basin; instead, they generate significant geographical and sectoral spillovers that affect European security, global trade routes, and broader regional stability. This systemic exposure underscores why analytical neglect carries tangible risks.

The article further showed that the Eastern Mediterranean's underdiscussion is rooted in theoretical blind spots, fragmented policy ownership, and media narratives ill-suited to complex, slow-moving power configurations. As multipolar competition intensifies and connectivity becomes a central vector of influence, overlooking regions that link systems rather than dominate them increases the likelihood of strategic surprise. For policymakers and analysts alike, treating the Eastern Mediterranean as a system rather than a collection of crises is essential to anticipating, rather than reacting to, future instability.

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