

## From Abu Dhabi to Athens: Redrawing the Mediterranean Against Türkiye



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis's visit to the United Arab Emirates at the beginning of this May embodied a long trajectory of cooperation that has evolved from mere defense coordination between the two countries into a comprehensive technological and economic partnership. The visit came at a highly symbolic moment, coinciding with the war the region has been witnessing since late last February, as well as with Abu Dhabi and Athens marking fifty years of diplomatic relations.

During the visit, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the governments of the UAE and Greece in the fields of artificial intelligence and technology. It was signed on the Emirati side by Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology, and on the Greek side by Foreign Minister Giorgos Gerapetritis.

According to the official Emirates News Agency (WAM), Mitsotakis renewed Greece's condemnation of the Iranian "terrorist" attacks targeting civilians, facilities, and civilian infrastructure in the UAE and countries across the region, describing them as a violation of state sovereignty and international laws and norms.

The Greek prime minister's visit draws attention to a pivotal alliance linking "Israel" and Greece from within the region, alongside the UAE as a geopolitical player from outside the Mediterranean axis. It is important to note that the UAE is

not a Mediterranean country in the geographic sense, as it lies on the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Yet Abu Dhabi, through its investments in ports and energy, its defense alliances, its involvement in the Libyan file, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), has imposed itself as a functional actor in the Eastern Mediterranean equation without being a geographic party to it. This is a phenomenon worthy of reflection and analysis.

This axis has no official name, nor is it crowned by a unifying trilateral treaty, yet it operates with notable effectiveness in the military, economic, investment, and diplomatic arenas. In contrast, a clear dividing line is taking shape that places Türkiye and Libya's Tripoli government on the opposite side of this equation, within the framework of a multidimensional struggle over maritime border demarcation, energy routes, and regional influence.

The axis brings together two geographically Mediterranean parties, Greece and "Israel", with a third party, the UAE, which belongs to the Arabian Gulf. But this geographic difference does not weaken the partnership; rather, it gives it a character that goes beyond traditional commercial logic. Although the volume of economic exchange between the UAE and Greece does not exceed \$2 billion, and between Greece and "Israel" is even less, the partnership among the three countries is described as a "comprehensive strategic" one. This description only makes sense when understood through the deep geopolitical logic governing it, which goes beyond the idea of neighborhood to the logic of multi-node influence networks.

#### Areas of convergence within the trilateral axis

The visions of Greece, "Israel", and the UAE converge in identifying the main risks in the region. For Abu Dhabi, Türkiye's foreign policy based on supporting political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood represents an existential threat to the Emirati project. For Tel Aviv, Türkiye's positioning in the region after the Al-Aqsa Flood and Ankara's hostile rhetoric constitute the most prominent challenges. For Athens, both the 2019 Turkish-Libyan maritime demarcation memorandum and Türkiye's legal positions in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean pose a direct threat to Greek sovereignty and interests.

Moreover, each of the three parties offers the other two what they cannot provide themselves. Greece gives its Emirati and "Israel"i partners a gateway to the European Union and NATO. "Israel", in turn, provides advanced defense technology (air defense, drones, electronic warfare) and extensive intelligence expertise, while the UAE supplies massive investment capital, access to Gulf markets, and diplomatic weight in the Arab world.

In 2020, Abu Dhabi and Athens signed a strategic partnership agreement that

includes a mutual defense clause, a step Greece described as one of the most important defense agreements signed since World War II. In December 2025, the tenth trilateral summit was held in Jerusalem between the prime ministers of “Israel”, Greece, and Cyprus, where a trilateral military cooperation plan for 2026 was signed, including joint exercises, the transfer of technical expertise, and the establishment of a Center of Excellence for Maritime Cybersecurity in Cyprus.

More importantly, discussions focused on forming a joint rapid reaction force of around 2,500 troops (1,000 from “Israel”, 1,000 from Greece, and 500 from Cyprus) to respond to crises in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the UAE is not a direct party to this trilateral architecture, it has participated since 2017 in Greece’s annual Iniochos exercises, concluded a defense innovation agreement with Greece in 2025, and also took part in drills involving “Israel” and the United States. Therefore, the visit of UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed to Cyprus in 2025 came as the first state visit of its kind to the island within these efforts.

The UAE backs the EastMed pipeline to sideline Türkiye

The issue of energy and corridors forms the second backbone of the axis through two parallel projects. The first is the EastMed pipeline project, a long gas pipeline (1,900 km) that was supposed to carry gas from “Israel”i and Cypriot fields via Greece to Italy.

Although U.S. support for the project was withdrawn in 2022 because of its high cost and questionable feasibility, it returned to the forefront again in late 2025 after the Jerusalem trilateral summit (“Israel”, Cyprus, and Greece), with the UAE backing it politically because it serves its goal of excluding Türkiye from the regional energy equation.

The second is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, known as IMEC, which was announced at the 2023 G20 summit and links Mumbai to Marseille via the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, “Israel”, and then Greece.

The latter is Abu Dhabi’s more ambitious project, as it places the UAE at the central node despite its stumbling after the Gaza war. Even so, Abu Dhabi, Athens, and Tel Aviv continue pushing it forward through investments in ports, railways, and subsea cables. In parallel, the Emirati company Masdar acquired Greece’s Terna Energy, and the UAE is also considering investing \$2 billion in a giant subsea electricity cable linking Greece, Cyprus, and “Israel”, known as the “Great Sea Interconnector” project.

In general, Emirati investments in Greece and “Israel” are concentrated in several strategic sectors such as ports, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, infrastructure, and agricultural technology. “Israel”i arms deals with Greece (the

Achilles Shield air defense system and PULS missiles) also represent an important financial factor linking the two military economies. Notably, these investments are not governed by a logic of purely financial return, but by the consideration of shared infrastructure.

Diplomatically, trilateral coordination appears across several platforms, such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which deliberately excludes Türkiye, the “Philia” Forum in Athens, and the trilateral summits among “Israel”, Greece, and Cyprus, which the UAE sometimes joins as a partner or observer. Positions also converge on specific regional files: the stance toward Haftar in Libya, rejection of the Turkish-Libyan maritime demarcation memorandum, defense of Cyprus’s exploration rights, and the sanctions regime on Iranian activities.

Why do the interests of the trilateral axis clash with Türkiye and Libya?

The interests of the trilateral axis — “Israel”, the UAE, and Greece — conflict with Türkiye across several interconnected arenas:

The first is the maritime dispute and border demarcation. The contradiction lies in two opposing visions of the law of the sea. Türkiye refuses to grant the Greek islands — most notably Crete — full rights in determining the exclusive economic zone, arguing that those islands, especially those close to its coasts (such as Lesbos, Chios, and Samos), lie on the continental shelf of the Turkish mainland and therefore cannot be considered to cut off that extension. Greece and Cyprus, meanwhile, adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which grants islands full rights.

This dispute is not merely a legal-theoretical disagreement, but concerns vast maritime areas containing potential gas reserves and strategic routes, and it has led to repeated maritime crises between the two countries.

Libya is also the most prominent arena for the indirect conflict between the two axes, given that the Turkish-Libyan maritime demarcation memorandum signed in November 2019 between Ankara and the Government of National Accord headed by Fayez al-Sarraj is considered legally invalid by both Greece and Cyprus because, in their interpretation, it cuts across Greek and Cypriot waters.

In June 2025, the Turkish Petroleum Corporation signed a new agreement with Libya’s National Oil Corporation to conduct geological and geophysical studies in the disputed areas, triggering a new wave of Greek protests. The Emirati position in Libya also intersected with the Greek-Cypriot stance rejecting the Turkish-Libyan memorandum, as this alignment represents a convergence of interests in opposing Turkish expansion.

Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood also remains a structural fault line with Abu Dhabi, despite Ankara's softer rhetoric in recent years. The UAE considers this file existential and not subject to compromise, no matter how much its economic relationship with Ankara develops.

This is, of course, in addition to Gaza and the Palestinian issue more broadly, as Turkish rhetoric against "Israel" escalated unprecedentedly after the Al-Aqsa Flood and the genocide committed by "Israel" in Gaza, with President Erdoğan describing the occupying state as "the greatest threat" to the region's stability.

Despite the normalization of relations between Ankara and Abu Dhabi in 2021 and the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in March 2023, which raised trade exchange to about \$19 billion, the relationship between Türkiye and the UAE remains one of competition rather than alliance — unlike Abu Dhabi's relationship with Greece and "Israel", despite the relatively limited trade volume with Athens and Tel Aviv.

Abu Dhabi pursues a policy of separating tracks

The UAE pursues a policy of separating tracks: a rising economic track with Türkiye, and an advanced strategic-security alliance track with Türkiye's rivals. This policy reflects an Emirati pragmatism aimed at benefiting in all directions. From the UAE's perspective, a country with advanced defense industries and a trillion-dollar economy cannot be ignored, yet at the same time it cannot share a regional vision or ally with that same state on the grounds that it supports the Muslim Brotherhood and positions itself in Libya, Syria, and the Horn of Africa in ways that harm Emirati regional ambitions.

Libya reflects one aspect of the collision between the Emirati-Greek-"Israel"i axis and Türkiye. The internationally recognized Tripoli government is backed by Türkiye, while the trilateral axis, along with Egypt, supports the government in eastern Libya (Haftar). The maritime demarcation memorandum is the clearest manifestation of this division because it transforms Libya from an arena of internal conflict into a player in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime equation. Accordingly, the future of a unified or divided Libya will largely determine the contours of the Eastern Mediterranean maritime landscape in the coming years.

The conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean is no longer only about gas or maritime demarcation; it has become a struggle over the structure of the post-2011 regional order. The Emirati-"Israel"i-Greek axis represents the camp that supports integration into the Western system, while the Turkish-Tripoli axis, joined by Qatar, represents a camp opposed to "Israel" and its allies.

The importance of the trilateral axis lies not in the strength of each party individually, but in the deep interdependence among them: "Israel"'s

technology, the UAE's capital, and Greece's geographic and institutional position. Therefore, any attempt to dismantle this axis requires targeting the links rather than the parties themselves. This is what Türkiye is trying to do by deepening its economic ties with the Gulf to shake the alliance, especially Abu Dhabi's relationship with Athens.

The UAE sees Greece as a stable European gateway within NATO and the European Union, and as a maritime partner politically aligned with it through which Emirati influence can be expanded from the Gulf to the Mediterranean without entering the complications of competition with major regional powers such as Türkiye. Athens, meanwhile, views the UAE as a rising financial and logistical power capable of supporting its ambition to become a maritime hub and a major energy hub linking the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe and the Gulf.

That is why the Greek prime minister's visit came to confirm that the relationship is no longer limited to defense or energy, but is now a strategic one encompassing artificial intelligence, ports, investments, infrastructure, maritime security, and advanced technology.

"Israel", for its part, forms a core side of this axis because it sees in these networks an opportunity to transform itself from a besieged peripheral state surrounded by conflicts into a regional transit center for energy, trade, and data. Hence the Emirati-Greek project intersects with the "Israel"i project within a broader vision based on building a new Eastern Mediterranean space more closely linked to the Gulf and the West and less dependent on routes dominated by Türkiye or other competing powers.

Türkiye, by contrast, realizes that these alliances and corridors are not neutral, but rather attempts to reduce its natural role as a gateway between Asia and Europe. For this reason, Ankara has used multiple tools to confront this trajectory, from the maritime agreement with Libya to strengthening its naval and military presence and improving its relations with former rivals.

At its core, the conflict is not only over gas or trade, but over a deeper question: who determines the maps of the sea, the corridors, and the logistical nodes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East as a whole?

Accordingly, the trilateral axis is likely to continue deepening institutionally through regular joint exercises, shared infrastructure investments (the electricity cable, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, and ports), and political coordination on regional files. But it will also face harsh tests, such as Türkiye's economic resilience and alliances, in addition to the Gaza war and its repercussions for "Israel"'s international image and the signs of isolation it has



recently begun to suffer, alongside fluctuations in the U.S. position, as happened when Washington backed away from the EastMed pipeline project.

This is what the UAE and its allies fear could be repeated in the old continent if less enthusiastic European governments come to power regarding the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor project.

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