

## Ankara's Neo-Ottomanism Defies the Rule of Law

Panayiotis Diamadis

Protection of Hellenism's Exclusive Economic Zone (the combined EEZ of Hellas and Cyprus) is the single issue which binds together all the national issues that Hellenism faces globally. The threat to Hellenism continues to be the same aggressive Turkish imperialism it has had to deal with for almost a millennium. Esteemed political commentator Burak Bekdil notes:

Erdoğan has apparently long harbored dreams of reviving the Ottoman[and] Empires knows that every political adventure outside Turkish borders increases his popularity, especially at a time when economic hardships could prune his approval at home.<sup>1</sup>

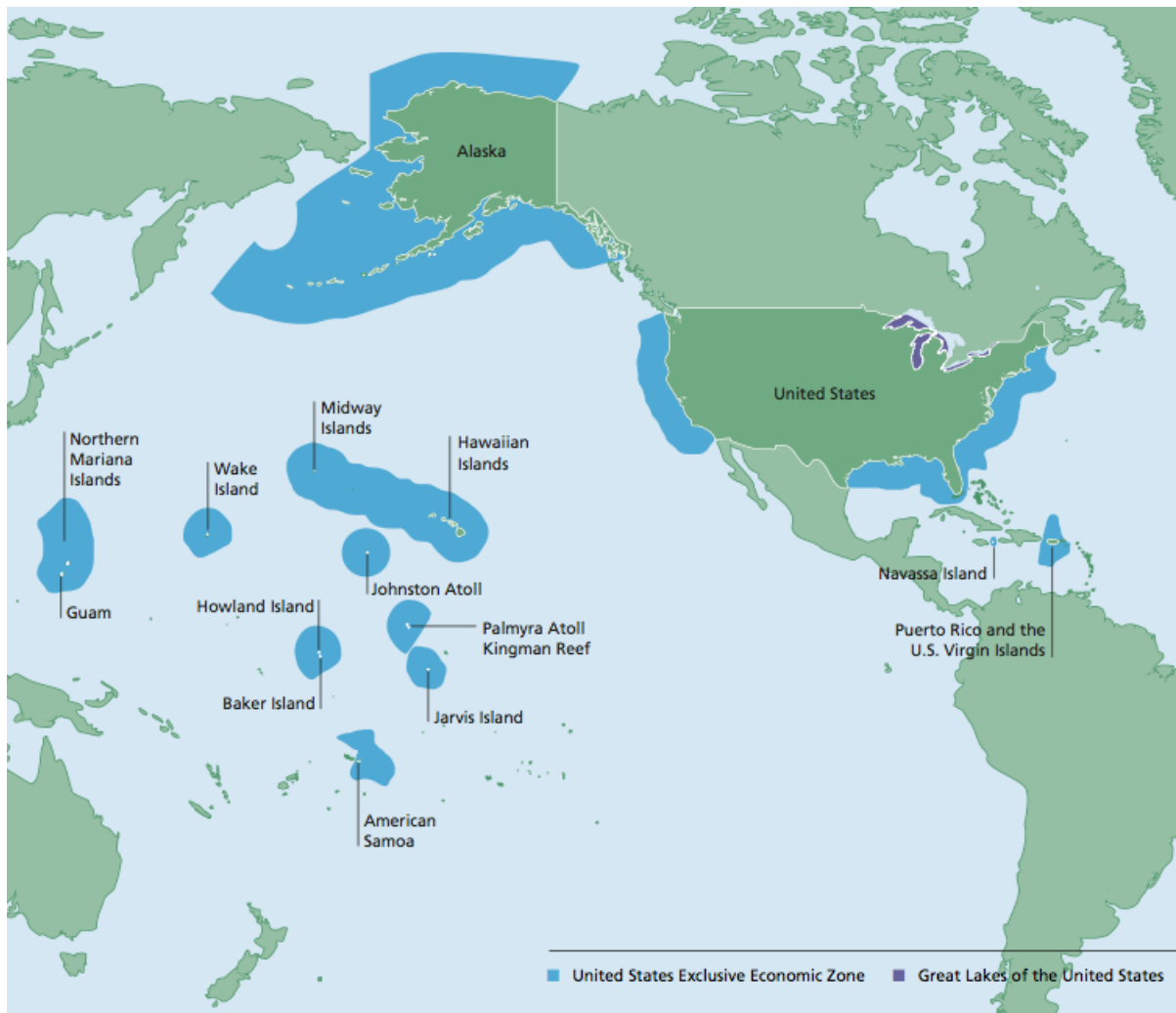
From the 1061 fall of the Armenian capital of Ani and the subsequent invasion of Anatolia to the policy of forced child-removal (*devşirme*) to the genocides of the indigenous Hellenes, Armenians and Assyrians to the 1974 invasion and occupation of Northern Cyprus, the assault has been relentless. Ankara's denial of international law and illegitimate claims to parts of the eastern Mediterranean far beyond the shores of Anatolia is only the latest round of this war. Hellenism's various national issues have crystalized into the protection of the combined Exclusive Economic Zones of Greece and Cyprus, and by extension, of Hellenism itself.

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is an area linked to a nation's adjacent territorial sea. The outer limit of the exclusive economic zone cannot exceed 200 miles from the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. Within its EEZ, each nation-state has sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing all-natural resources of the waters super adjacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil together with other activities such as the production of energy from water, currents and wind. Jurisdiction also extends to the establishment and use of artificial islands, installations and structures, marine scientific research, the protection and preservation of the marine environment, and other rights and duties.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines the rights and responsibilities of nations with respect to their use of the world's oceans, establishing

guidelines for businesses, the environment, and the management of marine natural resources. The Convention was concluded in 1982 and came into force in 1994.<sup>3</sup>

The American EEZ extends no more than 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea baseline and is adjacent to the twelve nautical mile territorial sea of the United States, including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and any other territory or possession over which the United States exercises sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>



The significance of the Hellenic-Italian Agreement of 9 June 2020 lies in the precedence it sets. The maritime border between the Greek and Italian EEZs were agreed to be the midpoint between the nearest Greek and Italian land masses, as documented in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Kerkyra (Corfu) and all the islands of the Ionian Sea as well as Crete and the islands of the south-east Aegean Sea have been legally recognized as possessing their own EEZs. The midpoint was calculated between these islands and the nearest Italian ones.

The Hellenic-Italian and the Helleno-Egyptian Agreements confirm – in law and in practice – that islands possess their own EEZs, regardless of their proximities to any mainland. This principle is exactly how the United States has the largest EEZ in the world, thanks to Alaska and the island groups in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

### **The Megisti linchpin**

There are very real geopolitical and geostrategic concerns with EEZs. The string of Hellenic islands between the Anatolian mainland and Crete form a Hellenic EEZ which legally restricts Ankara to its coastline. The most important part of this line is around the Megisti group,<sup>5</sup> commonly known as Castellorizo, together with the islets of Ro the west and Strongyli<sup>6</sup> to the east.

The EEZ of Strongyli enables the Exclusive Economic Zones of Greece and Cyprus to meet, providing Israel with contiguous contact with the entire European Union, from Cyprus to Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The Megisti group forms the linchpin of this contact. Beyond an interesting cartographic exercise, it enables Israel to bulk export (and import) directly to (and from) the European Union without need to go through another country. Of chief interest to Jerusalem and to Rome is the export of surplus natural gas. Italy is the European Union's largest consumer of natural gas<sup>8</sup> and Israel has recently found deposits in its own EEZ far greater than its domestic needs.

As illustrated by the Memorandum of Understanding between Ankara and the "authorities" in Tripoli (Libya), ratified by the Turkish Parliament in December 2019,<sup>9</sup> the authorities in Ankara are determined to block this legal reality becoming *realpolitik*. Maps presented by President Erdogan in live television broadcasts (laser pointer in hand) illustrate Ankara's claims and determination to eliminate the EEZ rights of Megisti and other Hellenic islands.<sup>10</sup>

These illegal and illegitimate claims and activities are only the latest episodes in the pursuit of Ankara's neo-Ottoman campaign. It is no coincidence that the infamous *Mavi Marmara* incident of May 2010 – the Turkish attempt to break through Israel's blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip – occurred almost simultaneously with the announcement of the delineation of a maritime border between Israel and Cyprus and the discovery of significant natural gas deposits inside Israel's EEZ.<sup>11</sup>

The *Mavi Marmara* incident and subsequent Turkish moves to do as Ankara pleases in the waters between Cyprus and Israel were met decisively by the Israeli Defence Forces. Ankara subsequently shifted its focus westward, to the maritime space between Greece, Libya, Egypt and Cyprus. The Megisti group form a thorn in the side of Ankara's neo-Ottoman designs and must be reinforced defensively, economically, demographically, in every way and at every opportunity.

## Ankara's positions

Contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Ankara refuses to accept that islands - including Cyprus - can have full Exclusive Economic Zones. The Hellenic-Italian Agreement reinforces Ankara's geopolitical isolation on this issue. Ankara is the only one of 193 member-states of the United Nations to support this position. Ankara insists islands should only be entitled to a twelve nautical mile EEZ. The official Turkish position is:

There is no automaticity in claiming that islands generate full maritime jurisdiction areas. Islands are ignored or given limited effect in maritime boundary delimitation if their location distorts equitable delimitation or if there are other special / relevant circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

As clearly illustrated by the map of *Türkiye, Mavi Vatan* (*Turkey, Blue Homeland*) first presented by President Erdogan during a September 2019 press conference,<sup>13</sup> from Ankara's point of view, the issue of maritime borders (Exclusive Economic Zones) covers their illegal occupation of northern Cyprus, their weaponizing illegal immigrants and refugees attempting to enter the European Union across the Aegean Sea and the Evros River frontiers as well as their abuse of the Muslim minority of Greece's western Thrace. This was reinforced when Ankara released a draft plan for Turkish Petroleum's exploration license on 30 May 2020.<sup>14</sup>

From Ankara's point of view, all the matters seen by Hellenes as 'separate' national issues are in fact one, single national issue: the imperial expansion of the Turkish state at the expense of its neighbors, especially Greece and Cyprus. During this year's celebrations of the 1453 conquest of Constantinople, Erdoğan declared, "I am wishing that God grant this nation many more happy conquests".<sup>15</sup>

## Western Thrace

The short land border between Greece and Turkey is also the most complex section of the frontier. While it largely follows the course of the Evros River, this is not absolute. At Orestiada-Karagac, the border cuts overland, bypassing a natural bend in the river. At the Delta of the river on the Aegean Sea, as waterways naturally do, the river changes course as silt deposits build up and are washed away.<sup>16</sup>

The completion of a border fence along the frontier marked out in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne therefore serves two purposes. It established a physical barrier to the state-orchestrated efforts by Ankara to force illegal immigrants and refugees across the border into the European Union. It also drew clear, visible line of control between the jurisdictions. Such a line also assists in delineating the respective Exclusive Economic Zones in the northern Aegean.

The island of Samothrace sits off the coast of Thrace and forms part of Evros Prefecture (Nomos Evrou). It is the anchor of Greece's EEZ in the northern Aegean, together with Lemnos, Ayios Eustratios and their neighboring islets. Western Thrace and these islands form the northern end of the line of Hellenic territories that run south and then east to the Megisti Group and then to Cyprus. Western Thrace, the Aegean Islands and Cyprus are the frontiers of Hellenism, guarding the province of Macedonia and the rest of Greece. It is not mere geographic coincidence that since its invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974, the expansionist Turkish state has focused its attacks on the northern Aegean Islands and western Thrace.

Consistently and persistently Ankara has pursued a policy of cultivating instability in those regions, attempting to weaponize the Muslim (note not Turkish) minority in western Thrace and alternatively claiming the Treaty of Lausanne is being violated by Greece Hellas and that the Treaty of Lausanne needs to be re-negotiated.

### **Tourism as 'soft power'**

While the islands of the Aegean Sea have long been magnets for tourists and their monies, these tourists have also acted as *de facto* ambassadors for Hellenism, reminding their personal circles of the Hellenic identity of these islands and Greece's. Legal jurisdiction as well as manifestations of Hellenic culture, such as archaeological and historical sites including churches and monasteries, testify to the Hellenic identity of these places. Although by no means exclusively Hellenic, but these are islands and lands where Hellenism has been the dominant element, millennia before the arrival of the Turkic peoples from central Asia.

American political scientist Joseph Nye coined the phrase 'soft power' in the 1990s, and put it into three categories: cultural, ideological, and institutional. Nye wrote that "[i]f a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others; it will encounter less resistance to its wishes." That is, he argued, "if its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow."<sup>17</sup>

'Soft power' is exercised in many ways: through museums and art galleries, through touring exhibitions, through film and television, through tourism. 'Soft power' is how countries project positive images of themselves and their policies and persuade other states to accept these ideas and policies. An incident with the Melbourne-based *Rome2rio.com* travel website suggests "7 ways to get from Fatih to Ottoman Crete" underscores this concept.<sup>18</sup> The Hellenic islands of the Aegean Sea, especially Megisti, are regularly presented by Turkish media and by tourist agencies with interests in Anatolia, as belonging to Ankara's domain. For example, "Meis – the small island with a big story."<sup>19</sup> The author writes "Meis ... also known as Kastellorizo ... is currently Greek ... even though it is only a mile off the Turkish coast.". The article consistently refers to the "Ottoman" and

"Turkish" ties to the island, while underplaying the island's Hellenic population and historical identity.

The "Fatih to Ottoman Crete" is not an isolated incident. Nor is it coincidence that the starting point is Fatih, a district which is not a transport hub, is some distance from the City's airport, freeways and ferry terminals. The area is the historic heart of Constantinople where the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia and numerous other medieval Byzantine monuments may be found. *Fatih* translates as 'Conqueror' in Turkish, originally from Arabic.

Nor was the *Rome2rio* article the first to target Crete. Under the title "Three-quarters of the island of Crete belong to Turkey" and accompanied by a map titled "Legal status of the island of Crete,"<sup>20</sup> the *Sözcü* media group published a report on 7 December 2017 claiming to demonstrate that legally, the eastern Mediterranean's second largest island belongs to Ankara. Far from a radical rag, *Sözcü* is one of Turkey's largest newspapers, selling around 300,000 copies daily.

The *Rome2rio* incident is neither an isolated incident nor coincidence. Anzac / Gallipoli related tourism has been very profitable for many years, though it has been in serious decline since the 2015 centenary. Tourism has long been used by Ankara as a weapon of 'soft power,' a means to promote its positions on a range of issues. Consider the advertisements featuring ancient and Christian Hellenic sites around Anatolia. These sites are "Anatolian," "Roman," or "Byzantine." Never "Hellenic" or "Greek."

These government websites on the Holy Monastery of Panayia Soumela (Our Lady of Mount Mela) in eastern Pontos are classic examples of this policy of denying the historic identity of Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian monuments. Nowhere on these government websites is it mentioned the Holy Monastery was built by, and for, Orthodox Hellenes.<sup>21</sup>

This state policy dates back to the one-party dictatorship of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), a conscious effort to erase the historical memory of the indigenous peoples of the lands now part of the Republic of Turkey. As recently displayed with the most *kitsch* display outside the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia on 29 May 2020,<sup>22</sup> the awareness remains that Turks are not the indigenous people of the lands they currently control, something that troubles the country's decision-makers deeply.

*Hürriyet* columnist and former member of parliament, Fuat Bol, wrote on 1 June 2020 that Ottoman Sultan "Mehmet the Conqueror" converted the Hagia Sophia into a mosque as required by the right of sword. The phrase "right of sword" refers to the Ottoman narrative that it supposedly has the right of a successful invader to rule an invaded land in line with its rules and wishes. In the same article, Bol then mentioned "those shameless Greeks who converted [Ottoman] mosques into churches."<sup>23</sup>

Having destroyed much of the living presence of the indigenous Hellenes, Armenians and Assyrians during the genocides of 1914-1924 and beyond, the Turkish state has sought to eradicate their physical heritage for over a century. Indigenous peoples may be defined as populations “practicing unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live.”<sup>24</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, was adopted by the General Assembly on Thursday 13 September 2007. Among the signatories is the Republic of Turkey. Article 11 Clause 1 states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.<sup>25</sup>

The forced conversions of churches and monasteries into mosques by the Turkish state, the destruction of sacred and secular sites belonging to the indigenous Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian peoples are violations of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The violations of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, of Hagia Sophia in Trapezounta, the destruction of churches in Cyprus, and thousands of other Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian chapels, churches and monasteries, orchestrated by the Turkish state need to be addressed as an aspect of an aggressive imperial policy of the Turkish state at the expense of neighboring peoples and states, in particular Greece and Cyprus.

## **Conclusion**

Having failed to make headway in Thrace and the northern Aegean with the aborted orchestrated influx of illegal immigrants and refugees, Ankara is continuing its probing of Hellenism’s defenses and the determination of the European Union to support these defenses in active and practical ways.

As history shows, wherever Ankara’s control extends, the policy implemented is the elimination of any non-Muslim, non-Turkish presence. Should Ankara’s position on islands not being entitled to exclusive economic zones is a direct threat to the stability or the Eastern Mediterranean. Should Ankara’s position regarding the Greek and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zones become widely accepted –as unlikely as that is– American territories in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would be stripped of jurisdiction over vast areas of ocean and their resources. This must be made clear to every American state and the American Congress. Ankara’s claims set extremely dangerous precedents, if accepted in any way, shape or form. Ankara’s claims and actions threaten the national interests of



the United States. More critically they mock the rule of law the United States has been advocating for decades.

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## ENDNOTES

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