



Envisioning a Framework for Eastern Mediterranean Dialogue and Regional Cooperation

Eastern Mediterranean Initiative

Tailored Study



Geneva Centre for Security Policy

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About the Author

Launched in 2020, the **Eastern Mediterranean Initiative (EMI)** is a track II dialogue process that brings together experts and former officials from around the Eastern Mediterranean region as well as external observers. Convened by the GCSP, the EMI aims to promote a peaceful and prosperous Eastern Mediterranean by building trust and understanding of shared interests. Its long-term ambition is to pave the way for structured cooperation and conflict prevention mechanisms.

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Executive summary

The rapid developments that have unfolded in the eastern Mediterranean over the course of the last decade have reinforced the notion of its emergence as a distinct region, highlighting the promise of greater cooperation among its states and better lives for its peoples.

Today, there is a growing awareness of the geopolitical importance of the eastern Mediterranean in its own right as an arena with its own dynamics of cooperation, competition and conflict, thus endowing it with the characteristics of a distinct region. The possibility of the eastern Mediterranean achieving far greater cooperation in a variety of spheres has also gradually assumed a greater importance in the outlook of the region's key littoral states. It is possible to argue that a high level of interaction and interdependence continues to prevail as a distinct dynamic of the contemporary eastern Mediterranean, in a context that is much less defined by the north-south divide that has long dominated the international politics of the wider Mediterranean region.

An opportunity currently presents itself for states of the eastern Mediterranean to chart a path forward towards greater regional cooperation, thus establishing a foundation that can potentially usher the region towards a future of greater economic prosperity, stability and – eventually – peace. The key to constructing such a foundation is enhancing confidence among regional states through a process of political dialogue that is premised on envisioning the eastern Mediterranean as a “shared region”.

Towards that end, participants of the Eastern Mediterranean Initiative propose the establishment of a regional forum that would be known as the Eastern Mediterranean Conference for Cooperation (EMCC) and based on the principles of the UN Charter. This forum or framework would provide a multilateral platform for the peaceful resolution of disputes in order to build a foundation for confidence-building and to prevent, mitigate and, it is hoped, fully resolve conflicts between/among its participating states. The nature and scope of such a process would evolve gradually over time through incremental steps designed to enhance trust and thus advance the legitimacy of the framework as a whole.

The rationale for the establishment of the EMCC builds on previous initiatives for the Mediterranean, namely the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean and the European Neighbourhood Policy. The inherent value of a forum for political dialogue for the eastern Mediterranean lies in establishing a platform for **much-needed region-wide political dialogue**, with the objective of building a foundation on which increasingly greater regional confidence and cooperation can be built. At the same time, establishing a forum for political dialogue is intended to provide the institutional basis that can give expression to an **emerging eastern Mediterranean “shared region”**, with the impetus for the forum emanating from *within* the region for the states and peoples of the region. Both of these aspects – the political nature of the dialogue and a focus on the eastern Mediterranean as a shared region – address what have been the glaring deficits of previous attempts at devising regional cooperative frameworks.



1. A rationale for dialogue on a shared eastern Mediterranean region

The rapid developments that have unfolded in the eastern Mediterranean over the course of the last decade have reinforced the notion of its emergence as a distinct region, highlighting both the promise of greater cooperation among its states and the many common challenges confronting the region as a whole. The prospects for realising this potential for cooperation that would benefit the states and peoples of the region would be greatly enhanced through a **framework for political dialogue** that is premised on **envisioning the eastern Mediterranean as a “shared region”**.

The rationale for this conception of the region can be derived from both its historical and geopolitical attributes. For millennia the eastern Mediterranean has witnessed a rich interaction among the various civilisations that emerged along its shores involving the exchange of commerce, ideas and people. At the heart of this legacy was the centrality of the sea in shaping the region’s history – a large maritime space that connected not only the seafaring societies that inhabited its coastal regions, but also their respective hinterlands in Africa, Asia and Europe. Much of the history of this interaction is associated with the great port cities that emerged along the Mediterranean’s shores: Alexandria, Beirut, Izmir, Salonika, Mersin, Piraeus and Istanbul, to name only a few. More than mere conduits for trade and travel, historically these port cities have long been associated with what can be referred to as a distinct Mediterranean culture, i.e. a cosmopolitan synthesis that combined Eastern and Western influences reflected in the region’s cuisine, lifestyle, and coexistence among a mosaic of disparate communities of merchants, diplomats, travellers, exiles, and artists. To quote from a recent work by one of the more prominent historians of the region, “the Mediterranean thus became probably the most vigorous place of interaction between different societies on the face of this planet, and it has played a role in the history of human civilization that has far surpassed any other expanse of sea”.¹

It is possible to argue that a high level of interaction and interdependence continues to prevail as a distinct dynamic of the contemporary eastern Mediterranean, in a context much less defined by the north-south divide that has long dominated the international politics of the wider Mediterranean region. Moreover, it is important to note that the interaction among the peoples and states of the eastern Mediterranean has historically transcended the region’s conflicts, and in many ways continued uninterrupted by the region’s many political, religious, and cultural divides. This rich legacy thus provides a **historical basis** for conceiving of the Eastern Mediterranean as a shared region, and a foundation for envisioning various frameworks for regional dialogue and cooperation.

The **geopolitical rationale** for conceiving of the eastern Mediterranean as a distinct shared region is no less significant than the historical basis underpinning this concept. The history of the Mediterranean has long been associated with the recognition of its position as a pivotal region in world politics, a reality

¹ D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London, Allen Lane, 2011, p.648.



reflected in the etymology of its name – “the sea in the middle of the Earth”. Although this centrality was eclipsed after the age of discovery that started in the early modern period, during which the locus of global politics shifted to the Atlantic, and subsequently to the Indian Ocean and the Far East, the eastern Mediterranean never lost its status as a key region in world politics because of its role as the geopolitical fulcrum lying at the intersection of Europe, Africa and Asia, and as a maritime passageway to other semi-closed seas, such as the Aegean and Black Sea.

More recently, the end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to reconceptualise the eastern Mediterranean as a **distinct geopolitical space**. Throughout the period of US-Soviet rivalry, the eastern Mediterranean was commonly conceived as an extension of other more geopolitically relevant regions, i.e. NATO’s “southern flank”, or as a subregional appendage of the Middle East. Today, there is a growing awareness of the geopolitical importance of the eastern Mediterranean in its own right as an arena with its own dynamics of cooperation, competition and conflict, thus endowing it with the characteristics of a distinct region. Perhaps most significantly, the eastern Mediterranean has gradually assumed greater importance in the outlook of the region’s key littoral states. Despite the fact that the focus of these states has long been directed towards different regional and institutional orientations – Greece and Turkey towards NATO, Greece and Cyprus towards the European Union (EU), Egypt towards Africa, and Israel and Egypt towards the Middle East – there is a growing recognition among regional capitals of the increased centrality of the eastern Mediterranean as a strategic geopolitical reference for their respective foreign and security policies.

This has been borne out by the many recent instances of growing cooperation among states of the region, not only in the field of energy, as in the case of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) with the recent offshore hydrocarbon discoveries, but also in a number of other fields, including trade, agriculture, tourism, defence, and disaster relief. In 2023, particularly noteworthy examples of this trend were the solidarity from regional states and civil society organisations with Türkiye and Syria during the February earthquake disaster and the assistance offered to combat the wildfires in the various countries of the region. These recent developments highlight the potential of regional cooperation to address the many **common challenges facing the eastern Mediterranean**, including terrorism, food security, environmental degradation related to climate change, and illegal migration – challenges that touch on both hard security and human security.

However, alongside this growing potential for regional cooperation, recent developments in the eastern Mediterranean also point to a **troubling trend towards the escalation of regional conflicts** and direct and indirect intervention in ongoing conflicts throughout the region. The persistence of unresolved maritime delimitation disputes has become coupled with conflicting claims over sovereign rights regarding hydrocarbon discoveries. In turn, some of the disputes over maritime delimitation have become linked to ongoing conflicts (e.g. in Cyprus and Libya), such that conflict resolution efforts have become more complex. Great power involvement in the region has at times served to defuse tensions (e.g. US mediation of the Israel-Lebanon maritime dispute), but at other times has served to exacerbate ongoing conflicts (intervention in the civil wars in Libya and Syria). Moreover, the persistence of **long-standing unresolved conflicts**



such as those in Cyprus and Israel-Palestine is exacerbated by the stalemate in conflict resolution efforts and the resulting lack of momentum in the various peace processes that are supposed to address them. Together, these trends constitute a troubling dynamic whereby conflicts are increasingly interlinked, with ever-increasing spillover effects (refugee flows, weak and failing states, and proxy conflicts), and are therefore prone to escalation.

Efforts to address the challenges of mitigating and eventually resolving regional conflicts and realise the aspiration of regional cooperation are predicated on a minimum basis of trust and collective action among regional states and societies founded on commonly accepted principles. In this context, the rationale for creating a forum for political dialogue in the eastern Mediterranean is two-fold.

First, such a forum can provide a firm political foundation for regional cooperation. Building such cooperation on a sustained basis will depend on establishing and solidifying greater confidence among the states and peoples of the region and anchoring such cooperation in a set of principles that give expression to the eastern Mediterranean as a shared region. Establishing a regional framework that can initiate and sustain a process of dialogue among key regional states can in itself serve as the basis for confidence-building and provide a further basis for expanding regional cooperative initiatives.

Secondly, a forum for political dialogue can provide a much-needed framework for conflict mitigation and resolution. Without channels for dialogue and processes for addressing ongoing regional conflicts, there is an ever-present risk of such conflicts escalating to open confrontation. The resulting regional instability not only sustains a state of high-level regional tension, but also hampers the ability of regional states to engage in sustained efforts at regional cooperation, whether with respect to traditional forms of cooperation organised around economic development and energy, or efforts to address the emerging challenges of climate change, resource scarcity, and migration, among others.

Noteworthy in this regard is the **recent trend towards regional de-escalation** as manifested in the reconciliation between Türkiye and Egypt and Türkiye and Israel; the successful conclusion of a maritime delimitation agreement between Israel and Lebanon with US mediation; the readmission of Syria to the Arab League; the conclusion of the Abraham Accords between Israel and a number of Arab states; and the ongoing talks between Greece and Türkiye. Together, these developments point to the ability of regional states to de-escalate tensions and offer a **propitious moment for the establishment of a regional dialogue forum**. However, while noting the current advantageous circumstances for establishing a dialogue forum for the eastern Mediterranean, it is important to underscore the urgency of such an initiative. The opportunity afforded by the current de-escalation may not last indefinitely, given the propensity of regional dynamics to revert back towards conflict escalation and regional instability.



2. Building on existing frameworks

The proposal to establish a regional dialogue platform builds on numerous previous attempts to institutionalise a process of regional cooperation for the states of the Mediterranean. Perhaps the most well-known of these efforts was the **Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)**, which was more widely known as the **Barcelona Process**. Established in 1995, the EMP brought together the EU member states and the countries of the southern Mediterranean in a process that sought to replicate the Helsinki framework (i.e. the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) in the Mediterranean region. The EMP was structured around three “chapters” (analogous to the “baskets” of the Helsinki process) of political and security cooperation, with the goals of establishing a common area of peace and stability; facilitating economic cooperation with the aspirational objective of establishing a Mediterranean free trade area; and increasing sociocultural exchange aimed at promoting mutual understanding at a people-to-people level.

The inability of the EMP to foster a Mediterranean-wide regionalism prompted a succession of EU-centred frameworks to engage with the region, namely the **European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)**, which was complemented by a more targeted **Southern Neighbourhood** policy for the countries of the southern Mediterranean (known as ENP-South), both of which built on a series of association agreements that would structure bilateral cooperation between countries of the Mediterranean and the EU.

In contrast to the bilateral focus of most of the EU-based policy frameworks, the establishment of the **Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)** in 2008 was an attempt to revive the Barcelona Process’s emphasis on region-wide cooperation. Bringing together the EU member states and 16 of the southern Mediterranean states, the UfM was to operate as a formal intergovernmental organisation focused on a project-oriented approach. This organisation would oversee the implementation of a wide array of regional cooperation initiatives under the auspices of a number of sector-specific forums bringing together government officials, the private sector and civil society from across the region.

Three broad observations can be made regarding this cursory survey of previous regional cooperative attempts for the Mediterranean. First, the broad approach of these initiatives has been based on frameworks **designed to link countries of the southern Mediterranean more closely to the EU**. However, rather than fostering regional cooperation, these frameworks were essentially structured around a series of bilateral relationships tying individual countries of the southern Mediterranean to the EU as a bloc. This pattern is also replicated in the frameworks adopted by Western security institutions towards the region, namely **NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue** and the various bilateral partnerships between the **Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe** and individual countries of the southern Mediterranean (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia).

Secondly, **the absence of political dialogue at the regional level has been replaced by a focus on functional, issue-specific cooperation**. With respect to the Barcelona Process, the political and security chapter constituted the least



effective elements of the EMP framework, thus leaving economic and trade relationship as the central pillar of the Europe-Mediterranean project. Similarly, the political level of the UfM tends to align closely with the overall emphasis on the organisation's project-specific approach as the basis for regional cooperation. As a result, the UfM's "political framework" is heavily dominated by a technical focus on functional issues and is devoid of any real political content.

Thirdly, **none of the previous initiatives focused on the eastern Mediterranean region in its own right**, in contrast, for example, to the Western Mediterranean Forum, otherwise known as the 5+5 Dialogue (comprising Algeria, France, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia). The eastern Mediterranean **has no regional forum** that can reflect the specificity of its emerging dynamics. Although the EMGF is a welcome initiative that partially compensates for this deficit, it remains essentially a functional organisation focused on regional cooperation in the energy domain, and thus lacks a political dimension.

Against this background, the inherent value of a forum for political dialogue for the eastern Mediterranean becomes apparent. By building on previous regional initiatives, such a framework will **establish a forum for much-needed region-wide political dialogue**, with the objective of building a foundation of regional confidence and cooperation. At the same time, establishing a forum for political dialogue is intended to provide the institutional basis that can give expression to an **emerging eastern Mediterranean shared region**, with the impetus for the forum emanating from *within* the region for the states and peoples of the region. Both of these aspects – the political nature of the dialogue and a focus on the eastern Mediterranean as a shared region – address what have been the glaring deficits of previous attempts at devising regional cooperative frameworks.

3. Establishing the Eastern Mediterranean Conference for Cooperation

The abovementioned limitations of previous initiatives point to the need to establish a new platform for a **sustained process of political dialogue** on issues of regional cooperation, regional confidence-building, and conflict mitigation and resolution. Therefore, participants of the Eastern Mediterranean Initiative propose the establishment of a regional forum that would be known as the **Eastern Mediterranean Conference for Cooperation (EMCC)** and based on the principles of the UN Charter. This framework would provide a **multilateral platform** for the **peaceful resolution of disputes** in order to build a foundation for confidence-building and to **prevent, mitigate and, it is hoped, fully resolve conflicts** between/among the framework's participating states. The nature and scope of such a process would **evolve gradually over time through incremental steps** designed to enhance trust and thus advance the legitimacy of the framework as a whole.

Any initiative intended to establish a new regional forum entails a number of conceptual and practical issues that would need to be addressed. These often relate to the nature of the proposed forum (formal/intergovernmental vs informal/political), the core principles underpinning the dialogue process, questions of



membership, the geographic boundaries of the region, the scope of issues to be addressed in the forum, and the role of outside actors.

Foundational principles of the EMCC

Any dialogue process must be founded on a set of **core principles** commonly espoused and adhered to by the participating states in order to govern relations among the governments and peoples of the region and **provide a basis for cooperation**. These principles are commonly derived from those enshrined in the **UN Charter**, namely the peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for international law, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, non-interference in the domestic affairs of states, and common (indivisible) security and enhanced prosperity for all states. Notably, these core principles also align with those enunciated in the **1995 Barcelona Declaration**, which provided the basis for the Europe-Mediterranean cooperation framework (i.e. the EMP) that encompassed most countries of the eastern Mediterranean. In addition to these core principles, ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of the dialogue process must rest on a number of complementary principles, namely the willingness of all parties to discuss issues of shared concern without preconditions and without prejudice to non-recognition issues and ongoing disputes.

Together, such principles constitute the **normative basis** of the proposed process of dialogue, and are intended to ensure its **long-term legitimacy**, which can take the form of a periodic review and evaluation of their implementation. Because countries have different interpretations of these concepts that touch on their core interests (e.g. with respect to the applicability of international law as the basis for settling maritime boundary disputes), the actual formulation of such principles is usually the subject of **careful diplomatic negotiation** in order to find a balance between the affirmation of core principles and the required flexibility to account for states' different and often conflicting interests.

Membership and geographic scope of the EMCC

Most regional organisations are associated with a **commonly accepted geographical delimitation** of the area covered by their member states. The eastern Mediterranean could be defined as a semi-enclosed sea area whose northern, southern and eastern borders are formed by seven countries that together constitute the littoral states of the region: **Türkiye** and **Greece** in the north; **Cyprus** in the north-east;² **Syria**, **Lebanon** and **Israel** in the east; and **Egypt** (and potentially **Libya**) in the south.³

While a notional geographical designation is useful for defining the geographic scope of regional cooperation envisioned by the forum,⁴ **a strict geographic definition is usually not the basis for defining its membership**. Rather, membership

² A generally acceptable solution will have to be found for the participation of Turkish Cypriots in the proposed EMCC.

³ While the Levantine coast is commonly accepted as defining the easternmost boundary of this region, the westernmost boundary is subject to debate. One definition places the region's western boundary along a virtual line from the cape of Ra's al-Hilal in Libya to the Greek island of Gavdos, south of Crete, while another more expansive definition designates Italy as the midpoint between the eastern and western Mediterranean.

⁴ A question might arise as to whether the regional cooperation framework envisaged for the eastern Mediterranean would cover the "inner seas" such as the Ionian, Adriatic and Aegean.



should uphold the principle of **inclusivity**, should include the widest possible range of countries, and should be based on the criterion of **relevance**, i.e. which countries would best serve to further the aspirations of the forum and realise its objectives. Based on these broader criteria, a case can be made for including states such as **Malta** and **Jordan**, given their potential to enhance prospects for regional cooperation. The same criteria would also apply to **Palestine**, provided a formula can be devised for inclusion pending developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. **Italy**, which straddles the mid-point between the eastern and western Mediterranean, and plays an important role in regional dynamics can also stake a claim for membership.

A more immediate practical question is which countries can be incorporated at the outset as the forum's founding members, and which **others could be included at a later stage, given specific circumstances relating to the conflict situation in these countries or sensitivities regarding diplomatic recognition of other member states**.⁵ Accordingly, one approach to defining membership could be based on a **phased process of inclusion**. Although inclusivity remains the defining principle, bringing certain countries into the forum might have to be deferred to a later stage when circumstances are more favourable. An alternative approach would be to extend **membership to all states of the region that choose to abide by the forum's founding principles** (see below) as the defining criterion for inclusion.

Finally, a key determination in this regard relates to the **role of outside actors** and their relationship to the proposed forum. Given the centrality of the eastern Mediterranean to the diplomatic, security and commercial interests of external powers, actors such as the **United States, Russia, France, the EU, NATO and, to a certain extent, China** have come to play a critical role in regional conflicts and regional security more broadly. Although they do not enjoy sovereign entitlements in the eastern Mediterranean, devising some form of affiliation for these actors with the proposed regional forum is therefore important to furthering its intended objectives. This can be in different forms, ranging from **observer status to associate membership**. In accordance with the phased approach suggested above for member states, outside actors can be **incorporated incrementally over time**, a process that will depend on the collective political considerations of the various members.

Whatever the status accorded to non-member states and/or entities, this should not preclude proactive thinking on the part of the forum for devising **constructive relationships with outside actors**. This can take the form of formal dialogues (the NATO-Mediterranean dialogue can serve as a model) involving particular actors in mediation efforts for specific conflict resolution processes, or soliciting support for regional economic cooperation schemes.

Modus operandi and structure

In terms of structure, cooperative frameworks can take the form of **formal regional intergovernmental bodies** anchored in official charters that are recognised in international law as a subcategory of international organisations, with formal

⁵ For example, Syria and Lebanon may object to joining a regional forum that includes Israel. Similarly, the conflict situation in Libya with two rival governments may make consensus on membership difficult.



rules and procedures for decision-making and deliberation (e.g. the African Union, League of Arab States, Council of Europe, Organization of American States etc.). Alternatively, such frameworks can also take the form of **informal or semi-formal political forums** that are groupings of states bound together by a common region and focused on a particular issue area as the subject of dialogue. The ASEAN Regional Forum established in 1994 as a framework for security dialogue for the Indo-Pacific region and the NATO-Russia Council established in 2002 are examples of such a model.

Notably, the **EMGF** was initially founded as an informal grouping of regional states with the common purpose of the joint development of the region's natural gas resources, and was subsequently incorporated as a formal regional intergovernmental organisation with a secretariat headquartered in Cairo with the adoption of an official statute in September 2020.

It might be preferable that the proposed EMCC initially take the form of a **loose semi-formal association of states that is unencumbered by official structures** to allow for flexibility in formulating the agenda for the region, and accommodating the different interests and outlooks of participating states in shaping the course and evolution of the forum itself.

In terms of **modus operandi**, this type of regional dialogue is commonly organised around regular official meetings at the ministerial and/or summit level involving heads of state and governments, with the latter usually entailing more precisely defined rules for decision-making. The frequency of such meetings, modalities for discussion, venue and convening state(s) and/or forum, and the agenda for discussion are all subject to agreement by participating states, depending on the purpose and structure of the framework. However, in all cases, dialogues at the official level are **governed by the rule of consensus** on the basis of **non-binding commitments** (although this might apply differently in different contexts).

In addition to the official level of dialogue, regional cooperative frameworks are often complemented by **various informal dialogues**. These can take the form of **Track 2 dialogues**, or **dialogues among civil society organisations**. Such dialogues may or may not be sanctioned at the official level, although they are meant to **broaden and deepen the issues under discussion by government officials**.

In general, therefore, regional cooperation forums develop along the lines of a **multi-tiered process**, with high-level official political representation usually at the summit level of heads of state and government; an intermediate level of official “functional” representation bringing in the relevant ministers or heads of agencies dealing with specific issues of regional cooperation (e.g. trade, justice, the environment, etc.), and a level of NGO/civil society representation that need not be based on any formal structure in the forum and can take the form of loose associations of civil society organisations generally supporting the official/formal processes.

As with many aspects of the proposed EMCC, the framework as described above is meant to grow incrementally and organically, especially once the process of political dialogue becomes founded on a **strong basis of sustainability and legitimacy**.



Scope and substance

Regional frameworks are meant to provide a platform for dialogue and mechanisms for cooperation around specific issue areas to be determined by participating states. The scope of these issue areas can be ambitious, encompassing a broad range of political, diplomatic, economic and cultural issues. However, given the challenges often associated with establishing such frameworks, it is often advisable to **start with a specific set of issues** focusing on one or two aspects of the relationships between/among participating countries that are subject to particular challenges.

Although the initial practical steps undertaken by states in the context of such a framework may be modest, the mere reality of a sustained political dialogue can be of enduring value in cultivating trust and laying the basis for more concrete objectives designed to increase cooperation. While ambitious objectives such as resolving regional conflicts might not be feasible during the initial phase, sustaining the process of dialogue may well create an enabling environment for such objectives to materialise during subsequent phases of the process, while paving the way for initial, more modest objectives of mitigating conflict and identifying specific areas for cooperation and confidence-building.

This, of course, does not preclude expanding the agenda of cooperation in the future, because the mechanisms for regional cooperation are meant to be **flexible and evolve organically over time**. Rather, it is meant to ensure the **careful management of expectations and the long-term sustainability of the process**, while avoiding perceptions of failure early on should the results not meet the ambitious objectives defined at the outset.

Therefore, the scope and substance of the regional dialogue should, on the one hand, be defined in **specific and somewhat limited terms, at least at the outset**, and, on the other hand, reflect the priority issues that constitute particular challenges for countries of the region. In other words, defining the agenda for dialogue involves striking a **careful balance between lofty ambitions and realistic outcomes in order to ensure the legitimacy and longevity of the process**.

The success of the forum in developing a sustained process of dialogue that, it is hoped, can develop into a serious agenda focused on conflict management and regional economic cooperation as envisaged in this paper will depend to a large extent on the **ability of member states to compartmentalise** various aspects of their relationship. Compartmentalisation entails a conscious effort to identify specific areas of cooperation or consensus and **insulate these issues from broader areas of disagreement – and even conflict** – that may define their overall relationship. In this way, member states will be able to carve out a specific (albeit limited) space for cooperation that will expand over time. The Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary agreement is an exemplary example of this approach.



4. First steps towards establishing the EMCC

The overall emphasis of this paper is one of an incremental, phased approach to the evolution and development of the proposed EMCC. This will allow the forum to set realistic objectives at the outset while putting in place a framework that will enable it to expand the scope of regional cooperation over time.

Options for establishing the EMCC

This same incremental approach should be adopted with respect to the establishment and launch of the forum itself. **Careful consideration needs to be given to the process by which the forum is created and its initial agenda once it is established.** Given the prevailing regional challenges and the sensitivities surrounding any attempt to establish the forum, two broad alternatives present themselves in this regard:

1. A regional initiative

Regional cooperation frameworks are usually initiated by a **specific state or group of states** that take the lead in proposing and advocating for such a process. The fact that the leadership of such an initiative is often undertaken by a specific state or small group of states is not in any way meant to exclude any particular state in the region. On the contrary, as emphasised above, **by their nature such regional cooperative frameworks are meant to be inclusive**, which is a key hallmark to ensure their success.

As such, one alternative would be to rely on an initiative from within the region itself in proposing and negotiating the establishment of the proposed eastern Mediterranean regional forum. This could take the form of a key regional state assuming the initiative: **Egypt is one potential candidate** in this regard, given its historic regional role, its role in establishing the EMGF, and the fact that it is perhaps the country least entangled in the maritime disputes that dominate the eastern Mediterranean. Alternatively, it might be preferable for a **group of two or more regional states such as Egypt, Türkiye, Greece and Israel** to assume the collective initiative of presenting the broad parameters of the proposed forum and then inviting the remaining states of the region to join in the establishment of the forum itself.

2. An outside facilitator

It may be the case that the tensions and sensitivities that currently prevail in the region preclude the abovementioned approach from materialising. In such an eventuality, it might be more feasible for a neutral outside actor to facilitate the process. Such a facilitator can take the initiative in presenting the idea for creating the proposed forum in order to generate consensus among key countries in the region that can subsequently take the lead in formally establishing it. Given their proven track record in conflict resolution and efforts at fostering regional cooperation, **Norway** or **Switzerland** might be candidates for such a role.



A diplomatic process for the establishment of the EMCC

Irrespective of the parties that take the initiative in accordance with either of the above approaches, the process of negotiating the establishment of the forum would most likely entail the following sequential steps:

1. generating a critical mass of consensus among key regional states on the objectives and overall purpose of the EMCC;
2. negotiating the elements of the initial formal declaration to be adopted by regional states announcing the intent to establish the forum (objectives, key principles, etc.);
3. determining the venue, participating states, and meeting format (most likely foreign ministers) for the adoption of the declaration;
4. negotiating the **founding charter of the EMCC**. This is likely to constitute a critical juncture in the process because it will involve creative diplomacy, sensitive compromises, and reconciling the different (often conflicting) interests of prospective members;
5. deciding on the official launch of the forum: chairmanship, participating states, agenda, final statement, level of participation (possibly summit level involving heads of state and government), and the adoption of the founding charter; and
6. negotiating a rotating chairmanship and the agenda for the first meeting.

A minimal initial agenda

In the context of the incremental approach proposed in this paper, it is suggested that the initial conference agenda should be defined in somewhat limited terms, focusing at the outset on **sustaining the political dialogue** among the forum's member states, with an emphasis on achieving consensus on the core principles of regional cooperation, **while deferring specific issues of conflict management/resolution and regional economic cooperation to later stages**, once the process of dialogue has acquired a degree of sustainability and legitimacy.

As such, it is suggested that the initial phases of the proposed regional dialogue should evolve progressively based on the following sequence of issues that can be addressed by the forum's member states over the near to medium term:

- **Political dialogue:** Generating regional consensus on the idea of a conference on cooperation for the eastern Mediterranean will in itself be an achievement. As such, the initial stage could focus on negotiating a **regional code of conduct** for cooperation and coexistence in the eastern Mediterranean.
- **Identifying elements for economic cooperation through the UfM:** The UfM was founded in 2008 as a successor to the Barcelona Process. As such, it already provides a region-wide Mediterranean forum for economic cooperation that is mostly project-based in nature. The proposed framework for eastern Mediterranean regional cooperation can build on specific projects already



under way in the UfM with the purpose of providing political support and showing early tangible progress in specific areas of economic cooperation.

- **Limited confidence-building measures:** This aspect is usually a key pillar of most attempts at establishing regional cooperation frameworks. The underlying principle here is a cooperative approach to security that is inclusive in nature, through modest steps, such as regional confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs).
- **Track 1.5/2 dialogue(s):** These can complement discussions of the above issues through appropriate dialogues that focus on fleshing out ideas for CSBMs, and specifically political confidence-building measures.
- **Tentative conflict resolution efforts:** Should the EMCC succeed in sustaining the process of political dialogue, member states can contemplate adopting specific steps for initiating or supporting conflict resolution processes for specific regional conflicts (maritime delimitation, Cyprus), or at the least agree on steps for conflict mitigation.

5. Conclusion: an opportunity for region building

An opportunity currently presents itself for the states of the eastern Mediterranean to chart a path forward towards greater regional cooperation, thus establishing a foundation that can potentially usher the region towards a future of greater economic prosperity, stability, and – eventually – peace. The key to building such a foundation lies in enhancing confidence among regional states through a process of political dialogue. The absence of a forum for regional political dialogue thus constitutes the critical challenge to any attempt at realising the eastern Mediterranean’s potential to provide a better future for its states and peoples.

It is this challenge that this paper has sought to address through a vision for the establishment of the EMCC. The key elements for such a regional framework must be based on commonly accepted principles of international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes, upholding the rule of consensus among member states, and a gradual approach that expands the scope of regional cooperation incrementally over time. Most important of all, the success of the EMCC will depend on a commitment by member states to sustain the process of dialogue even during times of heightened regional tensions – which is precisely when political dialogue is most needed.

Through such an approach, the process of dialogue will acquire a degree of legitimacy and longevity that can potentially evolve towards institutionalising the EMCC as a formal intergovernmental body for the region. However the process of regional dialogue actually evolves, the establishment of the proposed EMCC should be seen as only an initial step that must be followed by a sustained effort by all stakeholders to utilise the forum to manage and contain regional conflicts, build a foundation of confidence and trust, and begin to identify distinct areas of cooperation to address the myriad challenges facing the region. It is hoped that the success of such an initiative will provide the basis for the eastern Mediterranean to eventually overcome its numerous conflicts and divisions, thus paving the way to fully realising its potential as a “shared region”.

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