

President Erdoğan's new rhetoric towards Greece

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In recent days, while the increasing incidents of radar lockdowns by Greece to Turkish warplanes and Türkiye's taking the issue to NATO were discussed, a new situation has emerged in Turkish-Greek relations with a statement made by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Sept. 3.

At the TEKNOFEST event he attended in Samsun, Erdoğan resorted to a rather harsh rhetoric due to his recent actions against Greece, "Hey Greece, take a look at history. If you go further, you will pay a heavy price. We have only one word to tell Greece: Do not forget Izmir [Smyrna in Greek]," he said.

However, the most striking part of his speech that made noise in the Greece and Western centers are the following two sentences, in which he also talks about the islands towards the end:

"Your occupation of the islands does not bind us, when the time comes, we will do what's necessary. As we say, we may come suddenly one night,".

Let's look at the 'occupation' part of the President's words. It is not common for the opinion that the islands in the Aegean are being 'occupied' by Greece to be expressed at an official level.

Firstly, there is no issue between the two countries over the sovereignty of the Greek islands in the Aegean. What Türkiye objects to, is that the islands, which were envisaged to be disarmed with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, were armed by Greece against this.

Recently, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that the armament of these islands is a 'violation' and started to voice that "if this violation is not remedied, the sovereignty of the islands will be discussed". However, this does not determine that the islands are occupied.

Or when Erdoğan talks about 'occupation', does he mean the islets and reefs whose status is uncertain and undefined by international conventions, rather than the islands?

Yes, the existence of these formations, most of which are not suitable for human habitation, is a matter of serious disagreement between Türkiye and Greece.

This issue of islets and rocks, which can be remembered from the dangerous crisis in 1996, brought Türkiye and Greece to the brink of war on the Kardak Rocks, just across the Bodrum peninsula.

One of the main challenges here is that the status of islets and reefs has largely fallen into a gray area. However, Greece claims sovereignty over these and raises a flag on some of them. It even relies on the fact that it put some lighthouses in the past as a basis for its claim to sovereignty.

Even so, Türkiye has always demanded that their status be resolved through negotiations between the two countries.

Again, if the President does not refer to the islands, but the situation of the islets and reefs, and the claims of Greece on them and some of its actions in this direction, then the issue should be named referred in this manner.

What we have said so far is only one aspect of the matter. Even if the islets and reefs are meant, this does not eliminate the problem. The reason for this is that regardless of what specific problem he says, Erdoğan's statements, such as "We will do what is necessary" and "We may come suddenly one night" will be directly associated with the intention of a military operation in the international public opinion and will create a perception in this direction.

Erdoğan did not utter the word 'occupation' this time when asked about Greece, both before he left for Sarajevo and after he set foot here. He presented the issue rather as radar lockdowns of Greece against Turkish warplanes. On the other hand, he insistently repeated his statement "We can come suddenly one night". It is seen that this expression has become a pattern in the President's discourse.

It can be thought that Erdoğan, among other motives, applied to this issue to strengthen his hand on matters with Greece and to draw their attention to this before his strategic meetings with Western leaders at the United Nations this month in New York.

For whatever reason, a very likely outcome of this rhetoric is that Greece will embark on a campaign to portray itself as a victim country in the West that is exposed to clear threats from Türkiye, who can be attacked at any moment. In other words, the campaign has already begun at a great speed.

Let's not forget that for a long time, Greece has already built its whole strategy on the goal of taking the U.S and the European Union to its side against Türkiye, acting on the same front with them and pushing Türkiye back. It is obvious that it has come a long way in this direction.

Another possibility is that Greece will strengthen this strategy even more. In this respect, the vicious circle we are in may get worse and as a result, Türkiye's move away from the West may gain a new momentum. However, shouldn't it be necessary to read these intentions of Greece and take action to nullify it?

It is thought-provoking that relations with the West did not become a similar priority at a time when Türkiye made great efforts to repair its relations with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Israel, prioritized this and even considered normalization with Syria.

Undoubtedly, Türkiye cannot in any way accept Greece's claim on the islets and reefs whose legal status is disputed. Similarly, Greek harassment in the form of increasing radar lockdowns on Türkiye's military flights in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas is

unacceptable. Greece deliberately escalated against Türkiye, including the incident of the radar lockdown over S-300s in Crete.

An important aspect of the issue here is the question of how Türkiye's response to Greece will be presented, with what content and with what style. In the discourse used, it is imperative that the peaceful message that Türkiye desires a solution with Greece through negotiations and dialogue, should not fade. While defending a just cause, it is necessary not to end up unjust, or rather not to be perceived as such.

With both the actions and the official discourses getting more serious, Turkish-Greek relations has entered into a significant turbulence. Moreover, both countries are on their way to the elections next summer. The management of Turkish-Greek relations is becoming more sensitive and critical than ever before. We should hope that common sense eventually prevails.