

Encyclopedia of Border Conflicts

The Imia/Kardak dispute: the creation of rocky grey zones in the Aegean between Greece and Turkey

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Summary

The Imia/Kardak dispute began in 1995 when a Turkish cargo ship ran aground on an uninhabited islet in the Aegean Sea. When the Turkish captain refused help from Greeks on the grounds that the islet was in Turkish territory, a serious dispute developed between Turkey and Greece. Yet in the same year, trade relations across the Aegean significantly improved because of the EU-initiated Barcelona Process, demonstrating the effects of the dual-border zone that the Aegean has become.

On December 26th 1995, the captain of a Turkish cargo ship called the *Figen Akat* made an error while sailing in the southern Aegean, a sea located in eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece. He ran his vessel aground on one of two uninhabited islets called Imia in Greece and Kardak in Turkey. It was an easy error to make, as the rocks are a navigational hazard. They are small, and they are located in a narrow corridor between some of the Greek Dodecanese islands (the nearest being Kalymnos, Kalolimnos, and Kos), and the Turkish mainland near Bodrum.¹ It was not a very serious accident, as nobody was injured and nothing toxic was spilled into the sea. However, the captain did something that later escalated into a major territorial

dispute between Greece and Turkey: when the Greek coastguard offered assistance, the Turkish captain refused, on the grounds that the islets were in Turkish, not Greek, territory.²

A few days later, an official from the Turkish government sent a note to the Greek embassy located in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, to state that these islets were part of Turkish territory. The Greek embassy officials immediately challenged that statement. They cited a 1932 agreement between Italy and Turkey, in which the islets were recognised as Italian, and as part of the Dodecanese islands. Given that the Italians later ceded all their Aegean territories to Greece (after Italy's defeat in World War II), this demonstrated, the Greek side argued, that the rocks were clearly Greek.

As this dispute occurred in the middle of a Greek festive season (Christmas and the new year period), it was possible that it would pass relatively unnoticed, especially as the two islets in question had no particular economic value, and nor were they located at a specific point that was key for political claims over the location of borders between the two countries. The Greek and Turkish governments regularly had disagreements about the location of Turkish and Greek air space and sea in all parts of the Aegean, and while these air and sea disputes often led to the scrambling of military planes or loud warnings being sent to the other side, nothing further tended to happen. For a while, nothing further happened this time, either. But in late January 1996, after Greeks began to return from their holidays, the Greek media picked up on the story about the Imia/Kardak islets and described the Turkish statements about

¹ The islets are located at 37°03'03" N and 27°09'04"E. A map can be seen at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Imia_with_legends.svg

² A full account of the details of this dispute can be found in Heraclides' book about the dispute between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean (Heraclides 2010).

them as an explicit Turkish attempt to annex Greek territory.³ The news story caused particular outrage on the island of Kalymnos, located just five miles away from the islets. One of the island's priests and the mayor of Kalymnos, along with a few others, went out to the rocks and planted a Greek flag on one of them. The Turkish side responded: a group of journalists from the national daily newspaper, *Hurriyet*, went out and replaced the Greek flag with a Turkish one.⁴

At this point, the matter escalated into a serious dispute, for the Greek armed forces became quite heavily involved: a Greek naval ship was dispatched to once again place a Greek flag on the rocks, and to remove the Turkish one. The Turkish naval authorities followed suit, planting a Turkish flag on the other rock. Both navies then mobilised large parts of their fleets, and the situation looked, for two to three days, as if it was going to spiral out of control. The prime ministers of both countries, Kostas Simitis on the Greek side and Tansu Çiller on the Turkish side, both recently appointed to their posts, became directly involved. The US government also became involved, with the then US President, Bill Clinton, taking a personal interest and sending his envoy, Richard Holbrooke, to broker a deal. Many external observers commented at the time that this appeared to be an extreme reaction towards a disagreement about two uninhabited islets in the Aegean sea; but as Heraclides notes, it was highly symbolically powerful, as it was a disagreement about land rather than air or the sea, and in the course of the dispute, the terms "Greek soil" and "Turkish

³ Heraclides suggests it was a Greek TV company that picked up the story (Heraclides 2010: 134); Wikipedia suggests it was the Greek magazine *Gamma* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imia/Kardak>; accessed 7th October 2013).

⁴ Pictures can still be found on the Internet. See, for example, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nid=40732>

soil” were often used by both media and politicians commenting on the event. You could plant a flag on it.⁵

Eventually, the immediate threat of violence receded, but the matter was by no means fully resolved, and it remains unresolved at the time of writing this entry. While the rocks themselves are of no economic or strategic value, their location in the Aegean, and the fact that they are land, however small, symbolically links them strongly to a lengthy and tense history of territorial disputes between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean region (discussed further below). To make matters worse, the Turkish side stated that the Imia/Kardak islets were not the only land in dispute, but that they formed part of a much wider group of islets and small islands within the Aegean that were ‘grey zones’ (*gri bölgeler* in Turkish). These ‘grey zones,’ according to the Turkish side, are areas whose sovereignty is not clearly determined within existing treaties, because the specific pieces of land were not explicitly named in the treaties. The Greek government has consistently and strongly denied that there is any disagreement about any piece of land located within the Aegean. The Greek media often cite the Turkish statement about ‘grey zones’ as proof that Turkey aims to expand its territories in the Aegean region.⁶ The ‘greyness’ deliberately asserts a lack of clarity, a kind of fog, that could potentially spread across the sea, and the concept unsurprisingly generated deep suspicions on the Greek side.

The debate about the Imia/Kardak islets which sparked the ‘grey zones’ dispute has continued to simmer ever since, and their name has become shorthand for referring to the political tensions around the issue of territorial disagreements about

⁵ Heraclides (210: 135)

⁶ Heraclides (2010: 207-8). See also <http://www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/grey-zones.html> for an account from the Greek government side, and <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/printnews.aspx?DocID=-16399> for an account from the Turkish side.

islets and islands in the Aegean. In one of the latest incidents in 2013, a Greek MP called Nassos Theodoridis, belonging to the Syriza Party (a coalition of Greek left-wing parties) was severely censured by his own party leadership for using the word ‘Kardak’ to refer to the islets, and for suggesting that they might indeed be Turkish.⁷

Despite the seriousness of this dispute in political and symbolic terms, it did not in fact disrupt the progress of an EU-initiated political and economic agreement concerning the whole of the Mediterranean region, which significantly improved, rather than harmed, relations between the Turkish and Greek sides of the Aegean. In late November 1995, less than a month before the captain of the *Figen Agat* ran his ship aground on Imia/Kardak, both Turkey and Greece were amongst 29 signatories to the Barcelona Process.⁸ This process, which has since developed into a heavily funded program called EuroMed,⁹ was intended to launch a project of ever-closer political, economic and social cooperation and partnership between all the countries involved in the Mediterranean, both those in the European Union (EU), and those outside of it. Amongst many other things, that agreement allowed much easier trade and travel between EU countries and other Mediterranean countries, including Turkey. This effectively meant that whatever disputes there might be between Greece and Turkey in national terms, the trade and traffic between them began to increase significantly from the same moment as the conflict about the Imia/Kardak islets erupted. So almost simultaneously, a very old dispute between Greece and Turkey was both exacerbated and ameliorated in the period 1995-6. This is important to note, as it points to the complexities of the fact that the Aegean not only contains parts of

⁷ http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_07/02/2013_482360. Last accessed October 7, 2013.

⁸ http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/barcelona_en.htm, last accessed October 7, 2013.

⁹ http://www.eeas.europa.eu/euromed/index_en.htm

the Greek and Turkish border region, it also contains an EU border. This combination means that while the two countries might come close to serious territorial conflicts over their own borders, the workings of the EU border that overlaps with the border between Greece and Turkey means that the business of everyday life, and most particularly travel and trade, carries on (almost) regardless.

This raises a wider question of what territorial disputes between countries that are encompassed by larger political unions actually mean. The Imia/Kardak dispute is a particularly good case to consider in this respect, for two reasons. First, as the territory in question is so insignificant in physical or economic terms, it is clear that the only interest on both sides is to symbolically maintain the integrity of political (national) territory, and the dispute only concerns that issue. And second, these two little rocks are located in the middle of a sea that, at the time of writing, marks one of the currently debated edges of the EU. Turkey has been a candidate to join the EU since 1987, longer than any other country, which means that it is neither in the EU nor entirely outside of it. This means, for example, that Turkey cannot gain the status of being a ‘European Neighbour’ to the EU, as that status is only permitted to countries that are clearly outside the EU.¹⁰ Turkey’s EU-candidate status prevents it from gaining the status of ‘European Neighbour,’ which provides a number of benefits and agreements between the EU and countries just outside its borders.¹¹ Although Turkey’s status as an EU candidate is formally a temporary one, the fact that it has held this status since 1987 stretches the definition of ‘temporary’ a little far. In addition, the Aegean itself, being a relatively small sea scattered with a large number of often tiny islands that separates the mainlands of two countries which have been

¹⁰ Cardwell (2011)

¹¹ See Kølvråa (2012) for a detailed and up to date discussion of the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy.

mutually suspicious of each other's intentions for decades, provides a complex border landscape in which disputes and conflicts can be expressed in a wide range of ways. At the same time, given the existence of the EU, those disputes can be kept relatively separate from many of the everyday uses of the Aegean. The historical background of how the Imia/Kardak conflict became the touchstone of this strange state of affairs is worth exploring.

Background

The Aegean has been a centrally important sea for populations in the southern European region for millennia. Pamuk suggests that the first ever coins in the world were minted in the Aegean region, suggesting that the sea's strategic location between land masses reaching in all directions (north and south as well as east and west) has made it a significant passage for trade and travel for just about as long as the region has been populated.¹² It was certainly a very significant sea for the Ottoman Empire, which lasted around 500 years, depending on how the dates are estimated.¹³ Certainly, from 1453 when Constantinople (Istanbul) was conquered by the Ottomans, the territory that is now contemporary Greece became a part of the Ottoman empire. Although the southern part of contemporary Greece became independent of the empire in 1821, the northern area and the Aegean region remained under Ottoman control until the early 20th century. The final conflict between the Ottoman and Greek sides occurred in the Aegean in 1922, particularly focusing in Izmir, a large and previously prosperous city on the Anatolian coast. This event marked the formal end of the Ottoman empire and the beginning of the Republic of Turkey. The conflict has been named the War of Independence in Turkey, and the Great Catastrophe in Greece.

¹² Pamuk (2000: 2)

The Greek army had invaded the Ottoman/Turkish territories in 1919, and in particular, they had occupied Izmir; three years later, the Turkish army under Kemal Ataturk counter-attacked and defeated the Greek army. In the process, much of Izmir was burned down and there was enormous loss of life.¹⁴ A treaty brokered by the League of Nations in 1923 after the end of that war, called the Treaty of Lausanne (or sometimes, the Lausanne Convention) remains the main initial legal premise for any territorial debates between Turkey and Greece in the Aegean.¹⁵ There were two distinctive aspects to the treaty. The first arranged for a massive exchange of populations between the two countries based on religious affiliation. Orthodox Christians who were Turkish nationals were to be moved to Greece, and Muslims who were Greek nationals were to be moved to Turkey.¹⁶ This generated enormous upheaval in the Aegean region in particular, as the centuries of travel and exchange between the two sides meant that there were substantial percentages of each population on both sides. What is more, each group tended to specialise in certain activities. This meant that the movement of entire populations also removed entire sets of skills and expertise, which severely damaged the economies of both sides. Furthermore, one of the key economic activities of the area, the trade between the two sides afforded by the Aegean sea and the islands that were conveniently located so that ships could hop from one to the other, was severely curtailed to the extent of being almost entirely stopped during certain periods.

The second element in the Treat of Lausanne was the outline of the territories that would be ceded to each side. This was a complicated matter, not only because the

¹³ Finkel (2005)

¹⁴ Milton (2009)

¹⁵ The treaty can be read in full at http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne

¹⁶ Hirschon (2003)

many islands and islets that are located in the Aegean made establishing a simple line impossible, but also because it was not only Greece and Turkey that had an interest in some of these islands. In the particular region affecting the Imia/Karduk islets, Italy was given control of the Dodecanese Islands in Article 15 of the Treaty. Article 15 names the main islands in the region and added the phrase, “and the islets dependent thereon” in order to include all the little bits of rock nearby. The Imia/Karduk islets were arguably included. The island named in the Article to which Imia/Karduk would be dependent islets would be Kalymnos. However, the closest land mass to the Imia/Karduk islets was Kalolimnos, which is also an islet, and which separates Kalymnos from the Imia/Karduk islets. As Heraclides notes, there was no provision in the treaty for the status of an islet that is the islet of another islet. There was an additional provision in the treaty in Article 12, which states that any islands located less than three nautical miles from the coast of Turkey would belong to Turkey. However, the Imia/Karduk islets are located just outside that boundary. This potential for doubt about the status of the islets was not raised until 1995 when the Turkish cargo ship ran aground; but the lack of clarity was there from the start.

This situation was further complicated by two other agreements, one made between Turkey and Italy in 1932, and the next an international agreement made by Italy 1947 after their defeat in World War II. The 1932 agreement was the result of a territorial dispute between Turkey and Italy about the status of some of the same small islands that have been the focus of the more recent dispute. In the 1932 agreement, Imia/Kardak is specifically mentioned as belonging to the Italian side.¹⁷ However, this was not a formal international treaty, and the Turkish government has since stated that it has no relevance for the contemporary dispute. And the 1947

Treaty of Peace with Italy cedes all of Italy's Aegean holdings to Greece.¹⁸ Article 14 names the islands, and adds the statement "as well as the adjacent islets." This is different from 'dependent islets,' and whether that can be taken to refer to the same islets as were intended in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne is still a matter of dispute, at least where Imia/Kardak are concerned.

There is an additional issue that has contributed to the level of tension over this disagreement in both Greece and Turkey, which stems from yet another event that occurred in 1995. In May of that year, Greece ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This convention includes a provision that each state has the right to extend the limit of its territory into the sea for up to 12 nautical miles.¹⁹ Currently, Greece and Turkey claim 6 nautical miles in the Aegean. If Greece extended this to 12 nautical miles, Turkey would be forced to pass through Greek waters to gain passage through the Aegean. For this reason, Turkey has stated that any attempt to enforce such an extension of Greek territory would be a *causus belli* (cause for war) as far as Turkey is concerned. Given that Greece and Turkey had already been in dispute since the 1970s about the relevance of the continental shelf underneath the Aegean, it is unsurprising that Turkey has disputed the right of Greece to extend its jurisdiction in this way. Greece had relied on a particular interpretation of the Geneva Convention of the Continental Shelf (1958), which stated that continental shelf territory belongs to islands as well as mainlands (Heraclides 2010: 78). Given the fact that Greece holds almost all the islands in the Aegean Sea, that extends the territory over which Greece potentially has jurisdiction quite considerably. This only became

¹⁷ Full text: <http://www.hri.org/MFA/foreign/bilateral/italtunc.htm>. Accessed 7th October 2013.

¹⁸ Full text: http://www.istrianet.org/istria/history/1800-present/ww2/1947_treaty-italy.htm

¹⁹ Pratt and Schofield (1996: 62)

an open dispute between Greece and Turkey when Turkey granted oil exploration rights to a state-owned Turkish company in areas that, as far as the Greek government was concerned, covered the continental shelf territories of Greece (*ibid*: 77). Here, oil interests are involved, so the stakes are considerably higher than in the Imia/Kardak dispute.

Collectively, these factors help to explain the apparently extreme reaction of both sides in this conflict about the sovereignty of a couple of apparently useless rocks in the Aegean Sea. The Aegean was in any case the location of the war that simultaneously established contemporary Turkey and contemporary Greece, in part in opposition to one another; the location of the Imia/Kardak rocks, right at the edge of territories that were previously under Italian control, left room for doubt about the status of these islets; Greece's ratification of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea earlier in 1995, which was the basis for suggesting that the territorial rights of Greece would be extended to 12 nautical miles in the Aegean, had raised considerable tensions in Turkey. That latter situation might well have contributed to the decision of the Turkish captain of the *Figen Akat* to refuse the assistance of the Greek authorities when he ran aground on the islets. It was, to combine two phrases, the conditions for a perfect storm in a teacup.

Contemporary conditions

The Imia/Kardak issue still rankles in many circles, particularly in Greece. The widespread belief in Greece that the country is often on its own in defending its own interests and territory, having been repeatedly let down by international powers that seemed to initially promise assistance only to abandon Greece later,²⁰ is

²⁰ Herzfeld (1986)

particularly strong just now, given the current financial and fiscal crisis in Greece and the EU's position in trying to manage that crisis. With social tensions rising in the country as a result of severe financial hardship, the tendency to turn to issues such as the Imia/Kardak dispute are strong indeed.

Yet despite that, the more recent border arrangements in the Aegean which include the EU and its associated EuroMed policies and development programs has meant that the dispute over Imia/Kardak has not dragged all the other aspects of relations between the two countries into its vortex. As mentioned earlier, it was in the same year as the conflict over Imia/Kardak erupted that the Barcelona Process was launched. From 1995 onwards, the practical effects of the 1923 separation between the two sides of the Aegean began to be significantly and noticeably softened. New and regular ferry services between the Greek and Turkish sides began; there was a significant liberalisation of trade restrictions between the two sides. The port authorities on the Greek side are now mainly guided by EU regulations rather than Greek state regulations, because they are located at the border between the EU and third countries.²¹ In a sense then, the disagreements between Turkey and Greece about rocky outcrops can carry on without having a major effect on other political, structural and economic issues, because those issues are driven by other political dynamics, and not the ones directly related to the history of tense relations across the Aegean sea. Imia/Kardak has in that sense become really nothing *but* a symbolic territorial dispute. That does not make it necessarily any less important in social and political terms than disputes where the economic stakes and the potential for war were much higher. In some senses, the issue becomes even more important as a result of having relatively few material consequences, as it makes it much less likely that the

²¹ Green (2010)

two sides will compromise on their ideological claims, given that the cost of remaining intransigent is no longer quite so high. And the potential symbolic benefits of being unwilling to compromise are enormous: nobody who has seen images of flags being raised after a successful battle can doubt the power of such images to affect the imaginations of the populations represented both by the winners and the losers. In the end, the combination of historical conditions and the fact that Imia/Kardak were relatively unimportant rocks upon which a flag could be planted, is what made them so very important.

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