

**Riyadh Redraws the Map:
Greece, Turkey and the Limits of Strategic Partnership**

John M Nomikos
(RIEAS Executive Director)

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The recent friction between Greece and Saudi Arabia should neither be inflated into a rupture nor dismissed as an administrative misunderstanding. What is taking place is more subtle: Riyadh appears to be drawing the conceptual boundaries of its relationship with Athens. Saudi Arabia is not turning Greece into an adversary. But it is demonstrating that its partnership with Greece does not amount to strategic alignment against Turkey, does not give Athens privileged influence over Saudi regional choices and, above all, does not make Greece indispensable.

The two Saudi diplomatic notes of 2 June and 17 July concerned delayed Greek permits for the East to Med Data Corridor (EMC), not IMEC itself. The distinction is important because some commentary has improperly fused the two projects. Yet the Saudi message was nevertheless unusually sharp. According to Business Daily, Riyadh repeatedly asked why the necessary permits for maritime surveys had not been issued and warned that further delays could affect the project's financing, commercial viability and contractual commitments; while competing projects could eventually render it irrelevant.

Taken alone, this could be treated as a dispute over implementation.

Taken together with everything else happening around it, it becomes something substantially more important.

Saudi Arabia has spent the past year systematically increasing its strategic options. Riyadh is reportedly considering routing the EMC through Syria rather than Israel. Saudi representatives have, according to sources cited by Kathimerini, been systematically absent from the IMEC Council during the preceding year. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia and Turkey have agreed to develop a railway corridor running through Jordan and Syria toward Turkey and eventually Europe. Then came the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement.

Its significance should not be exaggerated, but neither should it be sanitized. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan have now formally committed themselves to a collective-defense principle under which an armed attack against one is considered an attack against all. The pact was not improvised in response to the latest crisis; it had actually been under development for almost three years, and subsequent announcements envisage political and military coordination, joint exercises and defense-industrial cooperation.

For Greece, that represents a qualitative change.

It does **not** mean Saudi Arabia has endorsed Turkey's claims in the Aegean or Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the Greek foreign minister points out that Riyadh has opposed the Turkish-Libyan maritime memorandum. It does not mean that Saudi Arabia would automatically intervene on Turkey's side in a Greek-Turkish confrontation; the operational meaning of the Mecca pact remains insufficiently tested and deliberately flexible.

But it **does mean** something that Athens should not talk itself out of recognizing.

Turkey now sits inside a Saudi security architecture in which Greece does not.

That is a boundary. Not necessarily a hostile one, but a very real one.

For several years Athens benefited from a particular regional configuration. Turkey's relations with several Arab capitals were deeply strained; Greece developed unusually close relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Israel's integration into the Arab world appeared to be accelerating; and projects such as IMEC promised to transform Greece's geography into strategic infrastructure connecting India, the Gulf, Israel and Europe.

That configuration has changed.

Turkey has repaired its relationship with Riyadh. It has acquired enormous leverage in Syria. It offers Saudi Arabia military scale, a rapidly expanding defense industry, substantial regional reach and a land route toward Europe. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has become increasingly unwilling to organize its connectivity strategy around Israel. The original IMEC concept itself has suffered from Saudi-Israeli tensions, with Riyadh examining routes that bypass Israel altogether. Now Saudi Arabia is choosing **optionality**.

It wants Greece without giving up Turkey. It wants Turkey without adopting every Turkish position. It wants relations with Washington while developing greater regional strategic autonomy. It can oppose the Turkish-Libyan memorandum and simultaneously enter a defense arrangement with Ankara.

There is no contradiction from Riyadh's perspective. There is only interest.

The mistake would be for Athens to confuse the vocabulary of “strategic partnership” with the existence of a strategic bloc.

That mistake becomes especially serious because Greece has made unusually tangible contributions to Saudi security. A Greek Patriot battery has protected critical Saudi infrastructure since 2021 and has provided real operational value during a period of regional conflict. Athens is now reconsidering the future of that deployment, although the government correctly stresses that Greece has also gained operational and strategic benefits from the mission.

There is therefore no reason for a theatrical Greek retaliation against Riyadh. But there is every reason for a sober recalibration of expectations.

Strategic relationships should be judged by reciprocity, convergence and behavior under pressure, not by the number of bilateral councils, memoranda and photographs produced during official visits.

And here the more serious Greek failure emerges.

According to Business Daily, **the common concern delaying both EMC and another cable project is the possibility of Turkish reaction during maritime surveys or cable-laying operations.** This is far more troubling than the Saudi diplomatic notes themselves.

Turkey's optimal outcome is not necessarily to persuade the world that its maritime claims are legally correct. It is to make those claims **operationally consequential**. If the possibility of Turkish interference causes Greece to postpone activities it otherwise considers lawful, Ankara begins to exercise influence over Greek behavior without having won a single legal argument.

That is the anatomy of self-deterrence.

The most effective geopolitical veto is sometimes the one your adversary never has to exercise because you have already incorporated it into your own decision-making.

And this is precisely where Greece cannot afford strategic complacency. Geography is an asset only when a state can convert it into infrastructure. A map may suggest that Greece is Europe's natural southeastern gateway; investors and governments are under no obligation to use that gateway. Corridors follow reliability, political confidence, cost and execution. Saudi Arabia's warning that alternative projects could overtake EMC should therefore be taken literally, not emotionally.

There is an irony here. The original IMEC memorandum was not even signed by Greece. Its signatories were India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, the European Union, France, Germany and Italy. Greece expected to derive enormous strategic value from its geography and from becoming one of the European gateways of the wider architecture.

That was a legitimate ambition. But Greece never possessed a contractual entitlement to become indispensable.

The Saudi-Turkish railway project makes that reality painfully clear. Riyadh and Ankara are now discussing a Saudi-Jordan-Syria-Turkey corridor that could ultimately connect the Gulf to Europe. Large sections remain conceptual or incomplete, so it would be foolish to declare it a replacement

for IMEC today. But strategically it already performs one function: **it gives Riyadh another option.**

And optionality is leverage.

This is therefore where responsibility must be apportioned carefully.

It is unreasonable to claim that Greece is 100 per cent responsible for IMEC's difficulties.

The corridor has been damaged by wars, deteriorating Saudi-Israeli relations, the changing position of Syria, Gulf rivalries and a profound restructuring of Middle Eastern security. Athens controls none of those forces.

But Greece **is** responsible for the things Greece controls. It controls whether permits are issued efficiently. It controls whether strategic infrastructure is treated as an instrument of national power rather than ordinary bureaucracy. It controls whether Turkish threats become an internal Greek constraint. And it controls whether relationships with countries such as Saudi Arabia are evaluated realistically rather than through the comforting language of permanent “strategic alliances.”

The correct lesson from Riyadh is therefore neither panic nor denial.

Saudi Arabia has not ‘betrayed’ Greece. It has done something strategically more useful: **it has shown Greece exactly where the limits of their partnership lie.**

Riyadh will cooperate with Athens where their interests coincide. It will simultaneously deepen its relationship with Ankara where Saudi interests require it. And it will increasingly choose between competing routes, partners and security arrangements according to which combination gives it the greatest autonomy and leverage.

Greece should behave with exactly the same cold clarity.

Saudi Arabia’s changing relationship with Turkey should therefore be read in Athens with sobriety, not alarmism. Turkey is becoming more useful to Riyadh in areas where it possesses obvious advantages: military scale, defense production, influence in Syria and overland connectivity. That does not diminish Greece’s own strategic value. Greece offers something fundamentally different: European institutional weight, political stability, control of critical maritime approaches, sophisticated infrastructure, close relations with India, Israel and the Gulf, and a geographic position that can make it one of the principal gateways between the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe.

But those advantages have to be protected and converted into facts on the ground. Greece should not allow bureaucratic delay, excessive caution or the anticipation of Turkish objections to erode positions that international law, geography and years of careful diplomacy have placed within its reach. The answer to Turkey’s growing relevance to Riyadh is not resentment towards Saudi Arabia, nor retreat by Athens. It is a more determined Greek strategy: faster execution, firmer defense of lawful sovereign rights and a clearer understanding that **strategic partnerships remain strongest when Greece itself remains difficult to bypass.**

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Riyadh is broadening its options. Athens should do the same, while making certain that partners continue to see Greece not merely as one available route to Europe, but as the most stable, credible and strategically valuable one.