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Will Turkiye move to scuttle Israeli–Cypriot cooperation?

The growing military collaboration between Israel and Cyprus has intensified Turkiye’s security concerns in the Eastern Mediterranean. Will this trigger Ankara to beef up its military footprint in Northern Cyprus, following similar observations and warnings by Lebanon’s Hezbollah?



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

Israel’s relentless military onslaught against civilians in Gaza has not only embroiled much of West Asia in an expanding warfront but also caused substantial geopolitical shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean – including, now, in the sleepy island of [Cyprus](#).

At the same time, escalating clashes between Israel and Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon also risk expanding the conflict into a broader multi-region conflagration.

On 19 June, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah issued [stern warnings](#) that any Israeli attempts to utilize airfields and ports in southern Cyprus to target Lebanese territory would lead to these sites being considered legitimate military targets by the Lebanese resistance.

Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides wisely sought to quell Lebanon's concerns and [downplayed](#) any claims of Nicosia's collaboration with Tel Aviv, saying simply that Cyprus "is in no way involved." But late last month, Turkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [revealed](#) the existence of intelligence reports showing that Greek Cyprus was assisting Israel and its western allies by serving as an operational base for Gaza ops.

The Cyprus divide: Historical context

Cyprus remains divided into two distinct parts: the north is governed by the [Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus](#) (TRNC), which declared independence on 15 November 1983 following the 1974 Turkish military intervention; while the south is governed by the Republic of Cyprus, recognized internationally, but referred to by Turkiye as the Greek Cypriot Administration.

As a former British protectorate, the UK has retained control over two base areas in Cyprus – Akrotiri and Dhekelia – sovereign British territories under the 1960 [Treaty of Establishment](#). These bases serve as strategic assets for the UK, particularly for military operations and listening posts in West Asia.

Both British bases are frequently used by the US and UK for transferring weapons to Israeli airbases, with the [Akrotiri](#) base notable for being used by British jets to attack Yemen and is reportedly part of British efforts to support Israel's war on Gaza.

The [Treaty of Guarantee](#), signed on 16 August 1960, by Cyprus, Greece, Turkiye, and the UK – established to ensure the independence, territorial integrity, and security of the Republic – plays a pivotal role in defining Turkiye's rights and responsibilities concerning Cyprus.

In the event of a breach of the treaty's provisions, the foreign guarantor powers are required to consult each other to determine necessary measures. If concerted action is not possible, each guarantor reserves the right to take unilateral action to re-establish the state of affairs as defined by the treaty.

This treaty provision was invoked by Turkiye during its [1974 intervention](#) in Cyprus. According to the Turkish foreign ministry, Ankara's intervention "blocked the way to the annexation of the island by Greece, stopped the persecution of the Turkish Cypriots and brought peace to Cyprus."

As a guarantor power, Turkiye's concern for the security of the entire island remains paramount despite the current division of Cyprus' administration.

A decade of diplomatic shifts

Since 2010, Turkiye's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation, largely influenced by the political Islam marked by two decades of President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan's reign. This shift has led to increased tensions between Turkiye and Israel and, at times, impacted their bilateral relations, though [business has continued](#) as usual despite Erdogan's pro-Palestine rhetoric.

The Mavi Marmara incident on 31 May 2010 was a significant turning point. Israeli forces intercepted a flotilla attempting to break the economic blockade of Gaza, resulting in the deaths of nine Turkish human rights activists. The fiasco caused a severe diplomatic crisis, leading to reduced diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

In the wake of deteriorating relations with Turkiye, Israel sought to strengthen its ties with Greece and southern Cyprus. This strategic realignment manifested in [joint military exercises](#), signaling a new era of cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Notable exercises include the Onisilos–Gideon drills involving aerial maneuvers and naval operations. Israel and southern Cyprus have also signed several defense agreements, facilitating intelligence exchange and counterterrorism cooperation. For instance, Cypriot troops have participated in counterterrorism training in Israel, and the two neighboring countries have coordinated responses to security threats.

Recognizing the strategic value of this level of cooperation, the US supported the [trilateral partnership](#) between Israel, Greece, and southern Cyprus, which led to the establishment of the '3+1' mechanism, which formalized the cooperation between these states and the US.

In 2019, the US Congress passed the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, which aims to bolster energy security and defense cooperation among the trio. A notable development occurred in September 2020, when the US partially lifted its arms embargo on Cyprus, which had been in place since November 1987.

On 17 June, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Cypriot Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos to [announce](#) the initiation of a strategic dialogue between the two countries. The first meeting is scheduled for fall 2024 in Cyprus.

Geopolitical implications and Turkiye's response

The [Eastern Mediterranean pipeline](#), a major joint geopolitical project, further illustrates the strategic cooperation between Israel, Greece, and [southern Cyprus](#), in addition to Egypt. Designed to transport natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe, the pipeline aims to reduce dependence on Russian gas and enhance regional energy security. The project has drawn considerable interest and support from Washington, aligning with its strategic goals in the region.

Now, Nasrallah's statements toward Cyprus have caught the attention of other major powers involved in the Eastern Mediterranean power struggle, particularly Russia and China. By targeting Cyprus, the weakest member of the 3+1 mechanism, the Hezbollah leaders may be seeking to weaken the US-led alliance with diplomatic support from Moscow and Beijing against Israel.

From Türkiye's perspective, the military rapprochement between southern Cyprus and Israel threatens Cypriot security and potentially impacts Türkiye's safeguards. The use of southern Cyprus ports and airspace by warships and military cargo planes of some EU member countries and the US Navy following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has been a source of serious discomfort for Ankara.

Turkish Minister of National Defense Yasar Guler recounted at length his [administration's position](#) to the official government news outlet, Anadolu Agency, on 14 July:

Since October, when the Israel– Hamas conflict began, we know that military elements of some European states (Germany, France, Netherlands, etc.) have been deployed to the Greek Cypriot Administration under the guise of civilian evacuation and humanitarian aid. We are also aware that warships from other countries, primarily the US (UK, Greece, Italy, etc.), have been using ports belonging to the Greek Cypriot Administration. We will continue to take all necessary measures against the Greek Cypriot Administration's activities that disrupt the balance on the island and pose a threat to the TRNC's security. We are fully determined to both build a future where our Cypriot brothers live in confidence, peace, and prosperity and to protect the rights and interests of Türkiye and the TRNC in the Mediterranean. Türkiye will continue to stand by its Cypriot brothers with the understanding of 'one nation, two states, and one heart' within the framework of the Guarantee and Alliance Treaties, as it has done until today. It will further develop and continue its efforts to ensure that the Turkish Cypriot people look to the future with confidence and to raise their level of prosperity.

As Guler's statement reveals, based on the rights granted by the Treaty of Guarantee, Türkiye may deploy additional air and missile defense systems and frigates tasked with air defense warfare in Northern Cyprus to increase security measures in the Turkish part of the island.

The evolving situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, centered around Cyprus, reflects a complex interplay of historical tensions, strategic alliances, and geopolitical ambitions. The strengthening ties between Tel Aviv, Athens, and Nicosia, backed by Washington's increased involvement, can significantly alter the regional balance of power.

In response, Turkiye, invoking its rights as a guarantor power under the Treaty of Guarantee, is signaling a potential military buildup in Northern Cyprus to safeguard its interests and those of the Turkish Cypriots.

The situation remains fluid, with major powers like Russia and China potentially playing more active roles in the future.

The coming months will be crucial in determining whether diplomatic efforts can prevail or whether the Eastern Mediterranean will face further militarization and instability. Cypriot planners will also have to tread carefully, being acutely aware that the island is firmly on Hezbollah's radar.

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