

Beyond the Water's Edge: The Eastern Mediterranean's Strengthening Security Axis

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Yoni Tobin
Senior Policy Analyst

Jonah Brody
Policy Analyst

The Eastern Mediterranean is undergoing a geostrategic shift in the aftermath of the October 7 war. Cyprus, Greece, and Israel have started building an Eastern Mediterranean defense architecture—visible in recent months with major Greek and Cypriot purchases of Israeli air defenses, a major trilateral summit, and Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz's recent trip to Athens. This represents a resounding rebuttal to the Iranian axis's attempt to weaponize the theater against Israel and a hedge against shared concerns about Turkey's expansionist intentions. If sustained, this framework could also serve as a bridge between Washington's European and Gulf partners, linking the Eastern Mediterranean to a possible U.S.-aligned security architecture in the Middle East.

The only thing missing is the United States. Its involvement and support can help accelerate and expand the nascent Eastern Mediterranean security framework, cementing the partnership between three of its democratic partners, and creating an anchor for the stability of a region that is vital and contested, including by Ankara, which presses expansive maritime claims and resumed aerial incursions into Greece shortly after the latest trilateral summit.

Lessons Learned From Two Years of War: The Eastern Mediterranean as a Crucial Theater

During Israel's 2023–2025 multifront conflict with Iran and its proxies, the Eastern Mediterranean was not spared. It became an active front as Iran and its proxies exploited it to attack Israel. Ultimately, however, Israel's resounding success against the Iranian axis underscored another crucial lesson: Israel is a highly capable regional security anchor. All the while, Greece and Cyprus proved to be steadfast partners for Israel.

Middle East Wars Do Not Stop at the Water's Edge

Iran and its proxies used the Eastern Mediterranean to strike the Israeli homeland. Hamas staged a naval invasion of Israel during its October 7 massacre. Throughout 2024, terror operatives from Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran's proxies in Iraq consistently flew attack drones outside Israeli airspace, then over the Mediterranean, to avoid detection en route to sites in Israel. While Israel intercepted most of these drones, some penetrated Israeli defenses and inflicted casualties. Fortunately, some of the worst Mediterranean-based attack plans did not come to fruition. These include unfulfilled Hezbollah pledges to [strike](#) Israel's offshore gas rigs, and an abandoned Hezbollah [plan](#) for a major naval invasion as part of a broader attack.

All these developments sent a clear message to nearby countries: future Middle East wars can, and will, expand to the Eastern Mediterranean theater.

Israel as a Regional Superpower

Ultimately, Iran and its proxies' efforts backfired. Instead of turning the Eastern Mediterranean into a major liability for Israel, Iran-backed aggression spurred greater regional integration, making the theater a maturing asset for Israel.

Israel's many war successes—including its most ambitious air campaign ever, in which it enjoyed freedom of action without losing a single manned aircraft, and its strikingly high interception rate while facing hundreds of Iranian missiles and drones throughout the war—strengthened its regional partnerships. Over the past two years, Israel forged new partnerships with regional countries like Greece's neighbors [Albania](#)—which sits along the Mediterranean—and [Bulgaria](#), as well as nearby [Romania](#).

For Athens and Nicosia, the message was unmistakable: Israel is a credible security partner capable of projecting power in their defense.

Durability of Eastern Mediterranean Partnerships

Greece and Cyprus reinforced that assessment through concrete wartime actions. Israel quietly relocated its civilian air fleet to [Greek and Cypriot airports](#) prior to Operation Rising Lion, exposing both governments to political and security risk. Their military infrastructure [supported allied operations](#), while both capitals served as [diplomatic conduits](#) during the conflict. This wartime coordination demonstrated that a trilateral security framework has enormous operational upside—not an abstract alignment but an operational partnership built on mutual trust, shared risk, and coordinated action.

The Eastern Mediterranean Democratic Bloc Solidifies

On December 22, 2025, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [convened](#) in Jerusalem for their tenth trilateral summit since 2016. Unlike previous meetings, this summit marked a decisive shift from energy coordination to operational security integration.

Earlier summits centered on [natural gas development](#), [pipeline projects](#), and [electricity interconnectivity](#), which provided the economic logic for cooperation and alternatives to Russian energy dependence. These pillars remain important but no longer define the partnership's strategic core. The joint declaration's emphasis on "[security, defense and military matters](#)," the military chiefs' action plan for [joint exercises through 2026](#), and the establishment of the [Maritime Cybersecurity Center of Excellence](#) in Cyprus signaled its maturation from periodic joint military exercises to a standing security architecture.

The summit and subsequent counter-drone deal between Greece and Israel built on a broader momentum in the trilateral defense relationship. Recent milestones include Cyprus's 2024 purchase of Israel's advanced [Barak MX air-defense system](#); Greece's 2025 acquisition of Israeli-made LORA missile systems for deployment on [Greek islands in the Aegean Sea](#); and Greece's efforts to acquire Israel's battle-tested technology like the Barak MX system to help form its new [Achilles Shield](#) project—a multi-layered air and drone defense system estimated at \$3.5 billion.

The Trilateral Partnership's Opportunities Ahead

Two trendlines—the deepening of U.S.-Israeli-Arab air and missile architecture, and the tightening of Cyprus-Greece-Israel defense cooperation—point toward a broader possibility:

Washington's Eastern Mediterranean partners and its Gulf partners joining under a U.S.-aligned security umbrella bridging Europe and the Middle East.

Progress is already underway. Since April 2025, Bahrain and Cyprus [signed](#) a major defense agreement; Greece and the UAE [reached](#) a defense innovation agreement; Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [participated](#) in Greek-led air force exercises that featured Israel and the United States; and the leader of the UAE made his first-ever [state visit](#) to Cyprus. These steps build on expanding economic, energy, and infrastructure ties among Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and the UAE.

The Trilateral Partnership's Challenges Ahead

The consolidation of the Cyprus–Greece–Israel security framework comes amid renewed Turkish assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean. Pro-government [outlets framed](#) the emerging framework as hostile to Turkish interests, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [warned](#) that Turkey “will not allow violations of its rights or what belongs to it”—referencing Ankara’s expansive maritime claims under its [“Blue Homeland,”](#) or *Mavi Vatan*, doctrine.

The most immediate friction point is Syria, where Ankara and Jerusalem now operate in overlapping theaters with competing objectives. After Bashar al-Assad’s regime collapsed in December 2024, Turkey moved quickly to consolidate influence, advancing plans to establish air-defense-supported positions in central Syria, including at the strategic [T4 airbase](#) near Palmyra. In April 2025, Israel preemptively [struck the sites](#) to block Turkish deployment. Deconfliction [talks](#) began almost immediately and were reportedly [formalized](#) by May 2025. Turkey has also sought to [deploy radar systems](#) inside Syria that could restrict Israel’s freedom of action over Syrian airspace and complicate Israeli strike routes toward Iran.

Turkey seeks a centralized Syrian state aligned with its interests and has [backed](#) Damascus’s ongoing [assault](#) against Kurdish forces to consolidate control—putting Ankara at odds with Israel, which prefers a weakened, decentralized Syria incapable of threatening its northern frontier. As Turkish military deployments expand and Israeli air operations continue, Syria remains the primary arena where miscalculation could test the emerging Eastern Mediterranean framework’s durability.

These Syrian frictions rest atop longer-running structural disputes. Israel-Turkey relations have deteriorated steadily since Erdoğan’s rise to power in 2002, and especially after the 2010 [Mavi Marmara disaster](#), despite intermittent normalization attempts. Turkey’s disputes with Greece over maritime boundaries and airspace persist. Turkish aircraft violated Greek airspace more than [11,000 times](#) in 2022 alone. Although incidents [declined](#) after the diplomatic rapprochement that began in 2023, they never entirely ceased. Within days of the December 2025 trilateral summit, [new incursions](#) were reported, followed by [five more](#) in early 2026. Ankara also continues to reject [Cyprus’s sovereignty](#) while maintaining over [100,000 troops](#) in occupied northern Cyprus.

Ankara is simultaneously pressing Washington to re-enter the F-35 program. During a January 5 phone call, Erdoğan [urged](#) President Trump to facilitate Turkey’s return to the program after its removal over the purchase of Russia’s S-400 air and missile defense system. Turkish acquisition would complicate an already sensitive balance: with Israel operating the aircraft and Greece set to receive it in 2028, Ankara would gain a platform that significantly expands power-projection capacity across the basin. The [2024 F-16 sale](#)—followed by [renewed pressure](#) on Israel and [coercive signaling](#) toward Greece and Cyprus—suggests expanded capabilities have not moderated Ankara’s posture.

Policy Recommendations

The Israel–Greece–Cyprus framework directly advances U.S. strategic interests in a contested region. It anchors three democratic partners, expands operational access for U.S. forces through Greek and Cypriot basing and logistics, and strengthens Europe’s energy security through Eastern Mediterranean interconnection projects. It also provides a bridge for deeper engagement between America’s Arab partners and Cyprus and Greece.

This architecture rests on U.S. statutory foundations. The [Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019](#) established U.S. participation in the trilateral dialogue (known as the 3+1 framework); affirmed that the security of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel is critical to U.S. and European security; authorized International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs and arms sales to Cyprus (ending a decades-old embargo); and expressed strong opposition to actions that would trigger sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Yet while the trilateral partners have moved rapidly toward operational integration, U.S. engagement has remained episodic rather than institutionalized, leaving Washington under-leveraged in shaping a framework that already serves core American interests.

Formalize the 3+1 Framework into a Standing Security Architecture

The United States should upgrade the 3+1 format from ad hoc summits into an institutionalized partnership. Washington should establish a standing 3+1 Coordinating Committee at the assistant-secretary level, regularize Cabinet-level participation, and designate a U.S. Coordinator for Eastern Mediterranean Security. Integrated working groups should focus on maritime domain awareness, counter-drone defense, energy infrastructure protection, and emergency response, giving the trilateral framework the same institutional weight as other U.S. regional security architectures.

Accelerate Defense Integration Through Interoperability and Co-Production

The United States should support the transformation of national procurements into a basin-wide defensive grid by facilitating U.S.–Israeli–Greek co-production of air and missile defense components, expanding foreign military financing (FMF) for interoperable weapons systems, and institutionalizing U.S. participation in joint exercises. Cyprus should be designated as a forward logistics and intelligence hub for U.S. and allied operations. IMET funding authorized under the EastMed Act should be fully funded and expanded to support trilateral officer exchanges and coalition planning.

Impose Hard Conditionality on Turkey’s F-35 Access

Turkey’s return to the F-35 program should remain frozen absent sustained, verifiable changes in Ankara’s behavior toward Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. Recent precedent demonstrates that arms concessions have emboldened rather than moderated Turkish conduct.

Before any re-entry, the United States should require Turkey to:

- End political and financial support for Hamas;
- Normalize diplomatic and economic relations with Israel;
- Cease airspace violations and harassment of Cypriot EEZ energy activity; and
- Demonstrate credible steps toward reducing military pressure in northern Cyprus.

These conditions should be formalized in any F-35-related legislative or executive action and reinforced through broader leverage over future defense transfers. Doing so ensures that access to America’s most advanced military systems reinforces—rather than undermines—regional stability and existing partnerships.