From Peripheral to Pivotal: The Eastern Mediterranean at War

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For decades, the Eastern Mediterranean was treated as peripheral to Middle Eastern conflict. Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion have ended that assumption. The region is now an operational theater in its own right—one that underpins U.S. and allied military activity across both Europe and the Middle East. Within days of the United States and Israel launching strikes on Iran, an Iranian Shahed drone struck the runway at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. Greek-operated Patriot batteries intercepted Iranian ballistic missiles over Saudi Arabia. The USS *Gerald R. Ford* docked at Souda Bay on Crete for combat repairs after sustaining damage during Red Sea operations. French, German, Italian, and Dutch naval assets surged into the basin alongside Greek air and maritime deployments. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assets have intercepted four Iranian projectiles in Turkish airspace, with debris falling across southern Turkey. The Eastern Mediterranean is no longer adjacent to the conflict—it is embedded within it.

These developments reveal a deeper reality: the Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as the operational backbone linking U.S. and allied military efforts across Europe and the Middle East. It functions simultaneously as a platform for force projection; a buffer against Iranian and proxy attacks; and a logistical corridor connecting U.S. European and Central Command theaters. Greece and Cyprus have proven themselves capable and willing operational partners under live-fire conditions, while Israel has integrated them into its wartime planning. Yet this emerging architecture remains incomplete. The absence of a formal U.S.-led framework leaves a strategically vital theater reliant on *ad hoc* coordination—an approach that is sufficient for crisis response but inadequate for sustained competition.

No Sanctuary in the Eastern Mediterranean

Iran and its proxies have long understood that the Eastern Mediterranean is not a sanctuary. During Israel's 2023–2025 multifront conflict, Hamas incorporated a naval component into its October 7 attack, while Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups used the Mediterranean as a corridor to launch drones toward Israel while avoiding radar detection. Hezbollah threatened Israel's offshore energy infrastructure and explored plans for maritime attacks that, while never executed, underscored the vulnerability of the theater.

Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion have confirmed that these were not isolated developments but part of a broader operational logic. Iran has retaliated against U.S. and Israeli strikes not only by targeting Israel and Gulf states, but by striking Western military infrastructure across the wider theater. The drone attack on Akrotiri—assessed by Cypriot and British officials to have been launched by Hezbollah—demonstrated that platforms supporting U.S. and Israeli operations are legitimate targets regardless of geography.

The Eastern Mediterranean as an Operational Backbone

The Eastern Mediterranean's role in the current conflict extends far beyond absorbing attacks. It has become the critical transition point between U.S. European-based logistics and Middle Eastern operations. Souda Bay on Crete—the only Mediterranean port capable of hosting a carrier strike group while

supporting advanced communications and intelligence functions—has performed both roles simultaneously. The *Ford* underwent repairs there while continuing to support operations. U.S. intelligence platforms have used both Souda Bay and, reportedly, RAF Akrotiri to support regional surveillance through the campaign—the former launching Rivet Joint signals intelligence flights, the latter hosting U-2 spy planes under the long-running Operation Olive Harvest, whose intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions over the Middle East predate the current conflict by decades.

The strategic value of that reliability has sharpened considerably as fighting in Iran continues. Spain has closed its airspace and denied use of its bases to U.S. aircraft involved in operations against Iran. Italy has reportedly denied landing rights to U.S. bombers at Sigonella. France refused overflight rights for aircraft carrying military supplies to Israel. The friction has prompted U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to openly question the utility of U.S. basing arrangements with NATO partners that deny access in a crisis.

However, Greece has not flinched. While alliance cohesion has frayed at the western end of the logistics chain, the eastern end has held. That contrast has direct implications for how Washington should think about its basing posture in Europe: if partners like Spain are willing to deny access in a crisis, and Souda Bay can perform the same gateway function, the case for treating Greece and Cyprus as the anchor of a formalized U.S. Mediterranean security architecture becomes not just strategic but operational. Reliability in wartime should be a precondition for staging assets.

Israel has internalized this reality. During previous rounds of conflict, Israel relocated civilian aviation assets to Greece and Cyprus while under missile threat. Israeli planners drafted contingencies to again relocate aircraft prior to operations. Routes through Athens and Larnaca have been maintained even as flights from Ben Gurion Airport were disrupted, highlighting the degree to which Israel treats the Eastern Mediterranean as an extension of its operational depth.

A Growing Partnership Tested Under Fire

The trilateral partnership between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel has evolved over the past decade from energy cooperation into an operational security framework. The December 2025 summit in Jerusalem marked a decisive shift, as, unlike in previous meetings, the countries placed a greater emphasis on defense coordination, joint military planning, and expanded exercises. The establishment of a Maritime Cybersecurity Center of Excellence in Cyprus further signaled a move toward institutionalization.

The current conflict has tested that framework under real-world conditions—and it has held. Greece moved quickly to deploy additional naval and air assets to Cyprus and reinforce air defenses protecting key infrastructure. Operating as part of an international integrated air and missile defense initiative supporting Saudi air defenses, Greek-operated Patriot systems successfully intercepted two Iranian ballistic missiles on March 19, demonstrating both operational capability and integration into a broader allied air defense network. Greek Defense Minister Nikos Dendias called the mission a point of pride, framing it in explicitly alliance terms: “We are protecting a country within the framework of an agreement, as well as EU citizens.” U.S. Ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker, appearing on the same panel, described it as “a historic day" that showed “how seriously Greece takes defense and its allies.” At the same time, Greece’s parliament approved plans to procure $4.6 billion worth of Israeli defense systems under its “Achilles’ Shield” initiative, which will ultimately deepen regional interoperability at a moment when Israeli systems are, once again, proving their worth in live operations.

Cyprus has absorbed a different kind of burden. Although publicly maintaining a posture of non-participation, the island has become a frontline node in the conflict. The drone strike on Akrotiri, subsequent military deployments by European states, and heightened Turkish activity on the island—including the deployment of six F-16 fighters—all highlight Cyprus’s strategic exposure. As a European Union member

outside NATO, Cyprus occupies a unique institutional position—one that creates ambiguity in crisis response and complicates command-and-control arrangements during conflict.

The Gap: An Architecture Without a Center

The war has exposed a central weakness: the absence of a coordinating framework to unify the growing network of partnerships in the Eastern Mediterranean. The response to Iranian attacks on Cyprus illustrates the problem. European states declared Cyprus's security an EU responsibility following the Akrotiri strike and rapidly deployed naval and air defense assets — but the response was organized under strictly European auspices, outside any structure that formally includes the United States. The result was effective in the short term but lacks the cohesion required for sustained operations.

The response was also reactive: European forces mobilized after attacks had already occurred, with no anticipatory posture and no pre-agreed framework for collective response. More fundamentally, it was not fully integrated into the intelligence architecture that underpins the fight. European states possess capable national sensors and air defense systems, but they are not systematically plugged into the U.S.-led networks that track and characterize threats at their point of origin. Whether originating from Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launches in Iran or Hezbollah rocket and drone attacks from Lebanon, the earliest and most actionable intelligence on these threats is found within U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and its regional partners. Without seamless integration into that architecture, European forces defending Cyprus are forced into a predominantly reactive posture—intercepting threats after launch rather than identifying and preparing for them in advance. A European-only defense of Cyprus can respond effectively to what it detects. It cannot generate the full, fused picture required to anticipate what is coming.

This problem reflects a deeper structural seam in how the United States organizes the battlespace. The Eastern Mediterranean sits at the boundary between U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and CENTCOM—two commands with distinct areas of responsibility, planning processes, and operational priorities. Historically, this division has required workarounds. When Israel was assigned to EUCOM, mechanisms were developed to coordinate with CENTCOM on issues like missile defense and regional contingency planning, recognizing that threats to Israel originated within CENTCOM's theater even as responsibility for Israel formally resided elsewhere.

Those arrangements were functional but *ad hoc*. Today, a similar dynamic applies to the Eastern Mediterranean more broadly, as Greece and Cyprus sit within EUCOM, but the threats they face increasingly originate in CENTCOM's battlespace. Without a formalized structure to integrate planning, intelligence, and command relationships across that seam, responses will remain fragmented, reactive, and slower than the threat environment demands. In effect, the United States has divided a single operational theater into two bureaucratic ones.

Cyprus's institutional position sharpens this vulnerability. As an EU member outside NATO, it cannot rely on NATO's collective defense mechanisms, while the EU's mutual defense clause lacks operational clarity and established command structures. This creates a seam that adversaries can exploit. Iranian and proxy attacks targeting infrastructure on Cypriot soil appear calibrated to test exactly this ambiguity—complicating both NATO and EU responses while increasing political friction within Europe. It is also worth noting that Cyprus currently holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, a role it will hold through June 2026. European solidarity with Cyprus has been swift and substantial—but one has to ask how much of that response reflects durable collective defense commitments and how much reflects the political awkwardness of allowing an attack on the presiding member state to go unanswered. When the presidency rotates, that question will matter.

Locking in the Gains

Like Israel's 2023-2025 war before it, Operation Epic Fury highlighted the Eastern Mediterranean's strategic importance to campaigns in the Middle East. The question now is how the United States goes about locking in the region's wartime role into a permanent architecture. In doing so, the United States should move forward on five fronts.

Smooth the Seam in the Eastern Mediterranean
The United States should treat the Eastern Mediterranean as a unified operational space rather than a boundary between combatant commands. Washington should establish a standing EUCOM-led planning cell with embedded CENTCOM elements focused specifically on Eastern Mediterranean contingencies, including integrated air and missile defense, intelligence-sharing, and crisis response. Building on earlier coordination mechanisms used when Israel operated under EUCOM—including missile defense coordination and joint contingency planning—the United States should formalize and expand these arrangements to include Greece and Cyprus. This would ensure that forces operating in the Eastern Mediterranean are fully integrated into the intelligence and command architecture that tracks and responds to threats at their source, rather than reacting to them after launch.

Formalize the 3+1 Framework as a Standing Security Architecture.
The Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act provides a statutory foundation for U.S. engagement with Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, but lacks institutional structure. The United States should immediately establish a standing 3+1 coordinating mechanism at the assistant-secretary level, regularize Cabinet-level engagement, and designate a senior official responsible for Eastern Mediterranean security. At the operational level, the Department of Defense should treat the region as a unified theater—establishing a standing EUCOM-led planning cell with embedded CENTCOM elements to close existing seams.

Accelerate Defense Integration Through Interoperability and Co-Production.
Washington should support the transformation of national procurement efforts—particularly Greece's Achilles Shield—into a basin-wide defensive architecture. This will require facilitating U.S.-Israeli-Greek co-production, resolving third-party transfer restrictions on Israeli systems, and expanding foreign military financing for interoperable capabilities. Institutionalizing joint exercises and fully funding IMET programs under the EastMed Act would accelerate officer exchanges and coalition planning.

Close the Cyprus Institutional Gap.
The United States should formally designate Cyprus as a forward hub for logistics, intelligence, and early warning—codifying a role it is already performing in practice. The United States should deploy additional air and maritime sensors to the island and work with European partners to establish pre-agreed rules of engagement and deconfliction mechanisms for its defense. Clarifying command relationships and response protocols would close a seam that Iranian and proxy forces have already begun to exploit.

Move Assets from Non-Cooperative Allies to the Region
The United States should rebalance its regional basing posture toward partners that provide reliable access in a crisis. Operation Epic Fury exposed significant friction within NATO, as several allies restricted overflight rights, denied base access, or imposed political constraints on U.S. military activity related to the campaign against Iran. At the same time, Greece and Cyprus have provided consistent operational support, with Souda Bay emerging as a critical hub for carrier operations, intelligence collection, and logistical throughput. Washington should treat reliability in wartime as a core criterion for basing decisions, shifting select assets and functions from locations where access is uncertain to those where it is assured. In practice, this could include repositioning certain naval assets from Naval Station Rota to

Souda Bay, and relocating select air assets from Incirlik in Turkey to more dependable hubs such as Ovda in Israel or Akrotiri in Cyprus. Prioritizing such locations would reduce operational risk, strengthen deterrence, and align U.S. force posture with the realities revealed by the current conflict.