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Why Turkey's Hold on Cyprus Now Threatens Regional Stability

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As Israel, Greece, and Cyprus forge a new security triangle in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara's long-standing occupation of Northern Cyprus has shifted from a historical anomaly to a live strategic liability. A phased Turkish withdrawal, monitored by international forces, could transform the island from a frozen conflict into the cornerstone of a rule-based order.

The Forgotten Occupation in Europe

Half a century after Turkish troops landed on Cyprus in July 1974, one-third of the island, territory belonging to a member state of the European Union, remains under foreign military occupation. Ankara still insists that its presence in the island's north is a peacekeeping mission designed to protect the Turkish-Cypriot minority. In official Turkish discourse, Cyprus is portrayed as a frozen conflict sustained by Greek intransigence. Yet the historical record, as well as the island's transformation since 1974, tells a very different story.

Cyprus today is not simply a divided island. It is the oldest and least addressed case of occupation in Europe, a geopolitical relic that distorts the security architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean. The region has since become a nexus of energy corridors, maritime routes, and digital infrastructure connecting Europe with the Middle East. The continued division of Cyprus, effectively Europe's last militarized border, now intersects with the security concerns of Israel, Egypt, and other regional democracies.

In the wake of wars in Ukraine and Gaza, policymakers have become acutely aware of the dangers of "tolerated aggression." The question of Cyprus is no longer just a moral or legal issue but one of strategic coherence. If the international community can

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envision phased withdrawals, monitored demilitarization, and international oversight in the Middle East, why should similar principles not apply to the Eastern Mediterranean?

Ankara's posture exposes a deep contradiction. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan champions Palestinian statehood and denounces Israeli occupation, yet he maintains troops and settlers on European soil. This double standard, decrying occupation abroad while perpetuating it at home, now undermines Turkey's credibility and weakens its claim to moral leadership in regional diplomacy.

A War That Outlived Its Excuse

The events that produced today's partition unfolded during a turbulent moment in the Cold War. In July 1974, the military junta ruling Greece staged a coup in Nicosia, seeking to annex Cyprus through "Enosis," or union with Greece. Within days, Turkey invoked its rights as a guarantor power under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee and launched a military intervention. The first wave of the invasion established a narrow beachhead near Kyrenia on the island's northern coast.

Yet even as international mediation began in Geneva and the Greek junta collapsed, removing any realistic threat to the Turkish-Cypriot population, Ankara pressed ahead with a second, far larger assault in August 1974. Turkish forces advanced to occupy nearly 37 percent of Cyprus's territory, including some of its most fertile agricultural land and economic assets. The ensuing cease-fire line, later formalized as the UN buffer zone or "Green Line," cemented the island's division.

In the chaos that followed, over 170,000 Greek Cypriots, nearly one-third of the island's population, were driven from their homes in what international observers later described as a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Approximately 40,000 Turkish troops established a permanent presence in the north, while Turkish-Cypriot enclaves in the south were evacuated to consolidate control. The result was a de facto partition that endures to this day, despite numerous rounds of UN-sponsored negotiations.

Washington's role in this period remains a subject of lasting controversy. Then, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly viewed the conflict through the prism of NATO cohesion, preferring not to antagonize Ankara, a key Cold War ally bordering the Soviet Union. The consequence of this realpolitik was tacit acceptance of a fait accompli that contradicted the very principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that the West claimed to defend elsewhere.

Since 1974, Ankara has gradually transformed Northern Cyprus from a Turkish-Cypriot autonomous zone into a militarized protectorate. The self-declared "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC), recognized only by Turkey, operates under

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Ankara's direct political and economic control. Turkish settlers, estimated by independent researchers to outnumber the indigenous Turkish-Cypriot population, have altered the island's demographics and diluted local identity.

The paradox is obvious: those whom Turkey once claimed to protect are now marginalized by the very state that professes to speak for them. Turkish Cypriots have seen their community absorbed into Turkey's domestic politics and Islamic conservatism. Many of their secular leaders, journalists, and civil-society groups have faced censorship or intimidation when advocating reconciliation with the Greek-Cypriot community.

The northern part of the island has also become an instrument of Ankara's regional strategy. Military facilities, intelligence installations, and infrastructure projects have linked the occupied zone more closely to southern Turkey than to the rest of Cyprus. The result is an entrenched dependency that undermines any pretense of autonomy.

After decades of diplomatic fatigue, many European policymakers quietly accepted Cyprus as an unsolvable anomaly. Yet the island's geography, lying between the Levant, the Suez route, and southern Europe, ensures that it remains strategically pivotal. As regional energy competition intensifies and as Turkey projects power from Libya to the Caucasus, the permanence of its occupation in Cyprus is acquiring new significance for the security calculations of neighboring states, especially Israel.

The Gaza Parallel and the Case for a Phased Withdrawal. Learning from the Middle East's Laboratory of Diplomacy

In recent years, diplomacy in the Middle East has generated one concept with enduring potential: the *phased withdrawal model*, a formula that combines gradual demilitarization, international monitoring, and external guarantees for civilian protection. The idea surfaced most visibly in the Trump administration's "Peace to Prosperity" plan for Israel and the Palestinians, but its logic has been echoed in subsequent U.S., European, and Arab proposals for post-conflict stabilization in Gaza.

The notion is straightforward. Withdrawal by an occupying power must be matched by mechanisms to prevent the resurgence of violence and to reassure the population that its rights will be protected. Monitors, drawn from neutral states or regional allies, create confidence and transparency where trust is absent. Over time, local governance is restored, reconstruction begins, and the occupying forces depart permanently.

While many have dismissed the Trump plan as politically one-sided, it inadvertently provided a template for conflict de-escalation through sequencing and verification. Ironically, President Erdogan himself endorsed aspects of the model when Turkey volunteered to participate in international monitoring of Gaza's reconstruction. By

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doing so, Ankara implicitly accepted the legitimacy of third-party oversight, precisely the principle it has long rejected in Cyprus.

If Turkey can advocate phased Israeli withdrawal and international supervision in the Middle East, why should the same logic not apply in the Eastern Mediterranean? The consistency test is unavoidable: either Ankara supports rules-based conflict resolution, or it acknowledges that its Cyprus position is founded on occupation rather than protection.

A Roadmap for Peace in Cyprus

A credible Cyprus peace process could follow a phased model adapted from contemporary stabilization missions. Its key elements might include:

1. Phased Turkish Withdrawal.

Turkish troops could be redeployed over an agreed timetable, perhaps five to seven years, with each stage linked to measurable confidence-building benchmarks. This process would begin with the removal of heavy weapons and non-Cypriot personnel, followed by troop drawdowns verified by the United Nations or the European Union.

2. International Monitors.

A multinational monitoring mission, ideally under joint EU–UN authority and including states from the Abraham Accords framework, could oversee the withdrawal and ensure compliance. Their mandate would include human rights oversight, property restitution, and protection of both communities during the transition.

3. Protection of Cypriot Muslims.

To address Ankara’s stated concern for the Turkish-Cypriot population, international monitors could guarantee minority rights, religious freedom, and equitable political representation under the reunited Republic of Cyprus. These guarantees would be codified in EU law, rendering Turkish “protection” obsolete.

4. Departure of Occupation Leaders.

Individuals who have presided over the illegal administration in the north, figures such as Ersin Tatar, Mehmet Ali Talat, and Derviş Eroğlu, could seek exile in Turkey or Qatar. Their departure would clear the way for authentic Turkish-Cypriot voices to participate in reunification.

5. Hostage Resolution and Property Restitution.

Recent reports that Greek Cypriots have been detained or harassed when visiting their properties in the north highlight the urgent need for legal mechanisms of restitution. As with Gaza hostages, humanitarian principles demand their immediate release. A

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property commission, under international supervision, could adjudicate ownership and compensation claims—drawing on precedents from Bosnia and Kosovo.

These steps would not only align with international law but also create a controlled and reversible process, avoiding the pitfalls of past “all-or-nothing” negotiations. They would replace the sterile rhetoric of “bi-zonal federation” and “two-state solution” with a practical sequence toward demilitarization, reintegration, and accountability.

Erdogan’s Double Standard

President Erdogan’s embrace of humanitarian rhetoric on Palestine contrasts sharply with his government’s conduct in Cyprus. Ankara condemns Israeli military operations as occupation while maintaining an occupation of its own within the European Union. It invokes international law to defend Palestinians but violates it to entrench Turkish settlers in Kyrenia and Morphou.

This contradiction has not gone unnoticed in the region. For Israel, which has faced decades of Turkish hostility over Gaza, the growing militarization of Northern Cyprus now looks like a strategic mirror image of the very practices Erdoğan denounces. Turkish drones, naval facilities, and radar sites in the occupied zone provide surveillance reach deep into the Levantine basin—potentially threatening Israel’s offshore energy infrastructure.

Erdogan cannot have it both ways. He cannot demand justice for Palestinians while denying it to Cypriots. His selective moralism erodes Turkey’s credibility in the eyes of Europe, the Arab world, and increasingly, Israel itself. The occupation of Northern Cyprus has become not just a European anomaly but a test case of international consistency: whether the norms applied in Gaza and Ukraine also apply to the Eastern Mediterranean.

From Cold War Legacy to Strategic Liability

For decades, Cyprus was treated by Western capitals as a frozen dispute, a nuisance too small to disturb NATO unity. But the global context has changed. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine revived the principle that borders cannot be altered by force. The war in Gaza underscored that prolonged occupations breed extremism, not stability. And Turkey’s own trajectory, from secular democracy to personalized autocracy, has turned Cyprus from an issue of ethnic division into one of regional security architecture.

Turkey’s entrenchment in Northern Cyprus now undermines its aspirations to be a credible mediator between East and West. The occupation alienates the European

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Union, complicates its relations with Israel and Egypt, and feeds mistrust among NATO allies. What once served as a bargaining chip has become a liability.

A phased withdrawal would not humiliate Turkey; it would liberate it. It would allow Ankara to normalize relations with the EU, re-enter the Eastern Mediterranean energy framework, and regain influence as a constructive regional actor. It would restore agency to Turkish Cypriots and rebuild trust with Greece.

But above all, it would align Turkey's foreign policy with the moral and legal standards it demands of others.

Europe's Forgotten Occupation Cannot Stand

The Cyprus question is no longer a historical footnote. It is a living contradiction within the Western order, a test of whether principles applied in Gaza, Ukraine, and the Balkans also extend to Europe's southeastern frontier.

Peace on the island will not emerge from nostalgia for old formulas but from modern tools of conflict management: phased withdrawal, international guarantees, and civilian protection. These are not revolutionary concepts; they are the same mechanisms that underpin every successful peacekeeping mission of the past thirty years.

If Ankara genuinely seeks justice in the Muslim world, it must begin by ending injustice in its own neighborhood. Cyprus, divided and wounded for five decades, offers the chance to prove that moral consistency and strategic pragmatism can coexist.

The world no longer needs new slogans; it needs the courage to apply old principles. A phased Turkish withdrawal from Cyprus—monitored, verified, and guaranteed—would transform the Eastern Mediterranean from a zone of tolerated occupation into a model of rule-based stability.

Israel's Strategic Awakening and the Eastern Mediterranean Realignment

For most of its modern history, Israel regarded Cyprus as a friendly neighbor but not a strategic concern. The island figured in tourism and humanitarian coordination, not defense planning. That perception is shifting fast.

Over the last two years, a series of analyses in the Israeli press by respected defense and intelligence veterans, among them Shay Gal, Ami Shooman, and Seth Frantzman, has crystallized a new consensus inside Israel's security community: Turkey's military presence in occupied Northern Cyprus now constitutes an operational variable in Israel's own security perimeter.

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This awakening did not occur in isolation. It followed repeated observations that Ankara has transformed Northern Cyprus into a forward operating base rather than a frozen buffer. Satellite imagery reveals the construction of new radar domes, UAV launch pads, and electronic-intelligence sites on the Mesaoria plain. Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 and Akinci drones, capable of ranges exceeding 300 kilometers, can monitor Israel's offshore gas platforms, naval routes, and even air-force corridors to Crete.

In Israeli military parlance, Northern Cyprus is evolving from *terrain of observation* to *terrain of influence*. That subtle shift carries enormous strategic meaning. For the first time, Israeli planners must consider that in a regional crisis, whether involving Gaza, Lebanon, or Iran, Turkey could disrupt their western maritime flank. The result has been a quiet but profound recalibration of Israeli risk assessments across the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Three Pillars of Israel's Concern

1. The Intelligence Envelope.

Cyprus sits astride the Levantine maritime communications grid: undersea fiber-optic cables, satellite uplinks, and energy conduits that sustain Israel's economy. Turkish signals-intelligence arrays in the north give Ankara unprecedented visibility over Israeli, American, and European data routes. For a state that depends on information dominance, such proximity represents not merely espionage risk but potential leverage in time of conflict.

2. The Drone Horizon.

The presence of long-range UAVs in occupied Cyprus compresses Israel's strategic depth. What was once a neutral gap between Haifa and Mersin is now a surveillance corridor under Turkish eyes. Even absent hostile intent, this persistent monitoring erodes Israel's operational freedom, an effect Israel historically treats as a precursor to escalation.

3. The Ideological Vector.

Erdogan's open sympathy for Hamas and his portrayal of regional politics as a civilizational struggle between "oppressors and believers" have injected ideology into geography. To Israeli strategists, capabilities combined with hostile rhetoric amount to potential intent. The concern is not an imminent Turkish strike but the structural instability of an actor who frames security policy through ideological grievance.

Energy, Infrastructure, and the New Maritime Chessboard

The discovery of natural gas in the Levantine Basin was supposed to knit the region together economically. The EastMed pipeline, the EuroAsia Interconnector, and LNG

transshipment corridors were conceived as bridges between the Middle East and Europe. Yet each of these projects runs within the surveillance or strike range of Turkish assets in Northern Cyprus.

From Israel's perspective, the occupation now affects not only Cypriot sovereignty but its own economic survivability. A disruption to these routes, whether through conflict or coercion, could sever Israel's export lifelines and its digital connectivity to Europe. Energy diplomacy and cyber security have thus converged into a single maritime strategy in which Cyprus is the western anchor.

This realization has accelerated defense cooperation among Greece, Cyprus, and Israel. Their trilateral exercises—*Noble Dina*, *Eurus Shield*, and *Onisilos-Gideon*—have evolved from symbolic gestures into genuine interoperability drills encompassing air defense, naval interdiction, and cyber-resilience. For Israel, these partnerships are not about nostalgia for Hellenic friendship but about *practical security geometry*: the protection of infrastructure, communication, and freedom of navigation across an increasingly contested sea.

From Energy Diplomacy to Security Doctrine

Jerusalem's policy debate now revolves around whether to formalize this alignment into a broader "Mediterranean Security Compact." Proponents argue that the Eastern Mediterranean's democratic arc (Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt) already functions as a de facto coalition bound by shared vulnerabilities: terrorism, energy sabotage, and gray-zone coercion from Turkey or Russia. *Institutionalizing cooperation through an intelligence-sharing and rapid-response mechanism would make deterrence explicit and predictable.*

Critics within Israel caution that overt alignment could provoke Ankara unnecessarily, undermining recent attempts at diplomatic thaw. Yet even the skeptics concede that strategic ambiguity is no longer sustainable when Turkish drones and surveillance radars operate 300 kilometers from Haifa. The conversation is shifting from *whether* to align to *how openly*.

For Athens and Nicosia, this represents an historic opportunity. For the first time since 1974, Cyprus is not pleading for solidarity; it is offering strategic value. Its geography provides early warning for Israel, logistical depth for Greece, and energy access for Europe. In the logic of deterrence, the island's reunification and demilitarization would convert a fault line into a bastion of stability.

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Lessons from Ukraine and Gaza

Two global shocks have accelerated this regional convergence.

The Ukraine War reminded every small democracy that deterrence begins with territorial integrity. The international consensus that borders cannot be changed by force now carries renewed moral weight. For Israel, whose legitimacy is continually questioned, that precedent matters. Allowing Turkey's occupation of Cyprus to persist unchallenged undermines the very principle that protects Israel's own borders.

The Gaza War reinforced another truth: protracted occupations breed radicalization and proxy warfare. Ankara's justification for remaining in Cyprus, protecting Turkish Cypriots, has long since morphed into demographic engineering and authoritarian control. From an Israeli perspective, such dynamics resemble the very conditions that sustain Hamas in Gaza: isolation, dependency, and ideological manipulation by a patron state.

Thus, the Israeli shift on Cyprus is not sentimental; it is empirical. The same pathologies that plague Gaza, occupation without legitimacy, governance without accountability, are visible in miniature on the Mediterranean's northern edge. Recognizing that parallel aligns Israel's moral calculus with its strategic interest: stability through legality.

Integrating Israel into Europe's Security Conversation

For decades, EU institutions treated Israel as an external partner, relevant to trade and counter-terrorism but peripheral to continental defense. The new Eastern Mediterranean geometry blurs that boundary. Israel now secures Europe's energy arteries, monitors its southern maritime frontier, and shares intelligence on cyber and drone threats. In turn, Europe's handling of Cyprus signals to Jerusalem how seriously it defends the rules-based order.

A pragmatic way forward would involve a ***joint EU-Eastern Mediterranean Security Forum***, bringing together Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Italy, and France. Its tasks would include:

- Coordinated maritime domain awareness;
- Protection of subsea cables and pipelines;
- Crisis-response protocols for regional escalation; and
- Humanitarian and reconstruction planning for post-occupation Cyprus.

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Such a framework would not replace NATO or the Union for the Mediterranean; it would fill the operational vacuum between rhetoric and enforcement. For Brussels, it would demonstrate that EU values can be defended not only in Kyiv but also in Kyrenia.

A Message to Ankara

Turkey's leadership still frames Cyprus as a non-negotiable national cause. Yet the cost-benefit equation has changed. The occupation isolates Ankara diplomatically, blocks its EU accession, and fuels suspicion even among Arab partners who otherwise welcome Turkish trade and mediation.

A phased withdrawal under international supervision would not signify defeat but maturity. It would allow Turkey to pivot from coercion to cooperation, unlocking its participation in regional energy projects and rebuilding trust with Israel and Egypt. More importantly, it would restore agency to the Turkish-Cypriot community, whose economic stagnation and demographic marginalization are direct consequences of Ankara's control.

The alternative is strategic overreach. If Turkey insists on treating Northern Cyprus as a permanent military outpost, it risks catalyzing the very coalition it fears—a technologically superior, diplomatically cohesive alignment of Mediterranean democracies. In that scenario, Ankara's dream of regional leadership becomes a self-fulfilling isolation.

Toward a Shared Doctrine of Stability

The Eastern Mediterranean is entering a decisive decade. Climate change, migration, and energy transition will test every coastal state's governance capacity. **Stability will depend less on military might than on networked resilience, the ability to coordinate information, logistics, and crisis management across borders.**

Cyprus can be the pilot project. A demilitarized, internationally guaranteed island could serve as the region's hub for disaster response, renewable-energy interconnection, and maritime surveillance. Such a transformation would turn Europe's last divided capital into the administrative heart of a cooperative Mediterranean zone.

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To achieve that vision, three principles must guide policy:

First, legality before leverage.

The international community must reaffirm that occupation cannot yield political recognition. Diplomatic creativity cannot replace the foundation of law.

Second, inclusivity before identity.

Cypriot Muslims and Greek Cypriots alike deserve protection and participation under one constitutional framework. External guardianship, whether Turkish or otherwise, must end.

Third, cooperation before confrontation.

The Greece-Cyprus-Israel-Egypt quadrilateral, supported by the EU and the United States, should institutionalize its collaboration through a ***Mediterranean Stability Compact focused on intelligence sharing and critical-infrastructure defense.***

Conclusion

Half a century after Turkish troops landed on Cypriot soil, the world can no longer afford to treat the island's division as a local anomaly. It is the missing piece in the Eastern Mediterranean puzzle—a test of whether rules, once invoked for others, apply within Europe itself.

The convergence of Israeli and European strategic thinking marks a turning point. Cyprus is no longer a moral cause; it is a security frontier. A phased Turkish withdrawal, monitored and guaranteed by a coalition of regional democracies, would transform that frontier into a bridge linking continents, economies, and civilizations.

For Ankara, the choice is stark: continue an occupation that erodes its legitimacy and invites encirclement, or embrace a withdrawal that restores its credibility and influence. For the West, the choice is equally clear: defend principles consistently, or concede that geography determines justice.

Cyprus's tragedy began in the 20th century, but its resolution will define the 21st. The same courage that ended wars in the Balkans and built peace in the Gulf can end Europe's forgotten occupation. The blueprint exists—the phased withdrawal model, tested in Gaza's diplomacy and validated by Israel's own security reasoning.

What remains is political will. And as history repeatedly shows, in the Eastern Mediterranean, stability is indivisible.