



PERSPECTIVES

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The Hellenic Countries Are Integrating Into the Middle East

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A lack of EU support against Turkey, as well as continued unfair economic policies, has seen Cyprus and Greece move away from Brussels and toward the Middle East.

Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis is a committed Europhile. Many Greeks, as well as Greek-Cypriots, view the EU as essential to their economic well-being, trade, and development. However, a string of [disappointments](#) regarding EU policy on the eastern Mediterranean has led both Greece and the Republic of Cyprus—the internationally recognized, ethnically Greek southern portion of the island—to begin to make a noticeable political shift toward the Middle East.

Athens and Nicosia are not leaving the EU, and this shift has been [moving forward slowly](#) for a while now. But the EU's soft stance toward Turkey's aggressive moves in the region as a whole has left politicians in both countries with little choice but to engage more closely with their southeastern neighbors.

Hellenism has both influenced and drawn from Middle Eastern cultures throughout history—Jewish, Arab, Persian, and Turkish alike. This is evident in Greek and Greek-Cypriot music, cuisine, language, religion, and lifestyle. Some might say Hellenism is the only remaining form of soft power from the time of antiquity.

In the modern era, however, Greece and Cyprus sought to move toward Europe. In the Greek case, it was financially dependent on European great powers after securing its independence from the Ottoman Empire, and European kings ruled the reestablished state under a foreign-established

“Greek monarchy.” Britain, meanwhile, colonized Cyprus until it achieved its independence in 1960.

Northwestern Europe, and later the EU, were huge influences on a revamped Hellenic civilization seeking to shed the eastern clutches of Ottomanism. Now, however, things might be reverting to the old—and, some might argue, natural—order of things.

After Israel’s rupture of ties with Turkey in the 2010s and the discovery of natural gas in the Levantine Basin, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus united to exploit the resources and embark on an ambitious project to send the gas to Europe. Other nations have since joined in. The tripartite alliance, backed by the US, has deepened to include [military cooperation](#) and joint lobbying efforts in Washington. The normalization of ties between Israel and several Arab countries has further moved this process along.

The Jewish state and its neighbors—who have long shared close ties with the Hellenic countries—all have concerns over Turkish aggression in the region and its neo-Ottoman ambitions. Ankara’s constant violations of Greek airspace and Cypriot waters led to calls from Nicosia and Athens for EU sanctions on Ankara. Yet Brussels, beholden to the close alliance between Germany and the Turks, only followed through on a [largely symbolic move](#). Even France, a recent advocate for Greek and Greek-Cypriot territorial rights, took a [relatively soft stance](#) on the issue of sanctions.

For many in the two countries—already skeptical of the bloc due to its role in the debt crisis—these were signs that [Europe can no longer be relied](#) upon. Israel and its Arab neighbors have already learned this lesson, as Brussels persistently overlooks Turkish and Iranian aggression in favor of a selective preoccupation with human rights and obsession with the Palestinian issue.

Military ties have become a staple of Greek-Israeli and Greek-Arab cooperation. [Greece sent Patriot systems to protect](#) Saudi oil fields, while the UAE sent fighter jets to Greece to participate in a joint air defense drill. Egypt participates almost annually with Greece and Cyprus in joint naval drills, and Israel recently agreed to open a joint flight-training center in Kalamata [with Greece](#). Jerusalem will also [lease drones](#) to Athens for border defense. Israel has also agreed to further [upgrade defense cooperation](#) with Nicosia and Athens in the coming year, and presumably abroad. Meanwhile, the US—which has grown closer to Athens and Nicosia of late—did indeed sanction Turkey over its purchase of Russian S-400 systems.

For years, Russian and Chinese policymakers have embraced the idea of “regionalism”—a concept according to which countries in a shared

geographical area work together on various issues, free of the influence of distant foreign nations. It looks as though this is occurring, though perhaps not in the way envisioned by Moscow and Beijing.

Kostas Grivas, a professor of geopolitics and weapons systems at the Hellenic Army Academy, has stated [that Greece will redraw the geopolitical map](#) that includes the stable Arab countries, India, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and France into a new Mediterranean-Middle Eastern alliance to counter the network of allies Turkey has formed with Pakistan and its Turkic brethren in Central Asia. Seth J. Frantzman, Executive Director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, [places Greece and India in a "greater Middle East"](#) in terms of emerging geopolitical alliances.

As the EU loses credibility in the region and faces extreme internal turmoil, such regional alliances—often based on common cultures and shared geopolitical interests—are likely to become more common in the face of shared problems. Greece and Cyprus, with the help of its regional allies and Washington, should continue to lobby Europe to take more action against Turkey. At the same time, it should continue to embrace the approaching reality, given the likelihood that Brussels will remain toothless against Ankara's neo-Ottoman policies.

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