

CYPRUS ON THE WORLD STAGE*

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Cyprus, an island near Turkey and Syria of roughly 1.3 million inhabitants, finds itself on the cusp of momentous change. As it belatedly makes its grand debut on the world stage after domestic Greek-Turkish communal issues have consumed its first 51 years of independence, it faces both great opportunity and great danger

That communal problem originated in 1570, when the Ottoman Empire conquered the island and its almost entirely Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian population. Over the next three centuries, immigration from Anatolia created a Turkish-speaking Muslim minority. British rule between 1878 and 1960 left this situation basically unchanged. In 1960, at the time of Cypriot independence, Turks constituted one-sixth of the population.

Cyprus was hardly the only territory rife with ethnic tensions that London eventually abandoned in frustration — think of India, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan — but it was the only one where it retained a permanent role for itself and brought in patron states, namely Turkey and Greece, as guarantors of the newly independent state.

This mischievous arrangement heightened tensions between both the island's two communities, and their patron states. Those tensions boiled over in 1974, when Athens attempted to annex the whole of Cyprus and Ankara responded by invading the island, seizing the northern 37 percent of the island's territory. Greek annexation fizzled but the invasion led to the establishment of a nominal "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC), which is maintained today by some 40,000 troops from the Republic of Turkey. Hundreds of thousands of settlers have since emigrated from Turkey, fundamentally altering the island's demography.

Cyprus remained thus for 35 years — divided, deadlocked, and largely ignored by the outside world — until two recent developments upended the island's obscure, if unhappy, status quo.

First, the AKP came to power in Turkey in 2002, and brought with it an aggressive program of regional domination. It initially kept this ambition in check, but with a heady electoral success in June 2011, followed immediately by its seizure of political control over the Turkish military, this intent emerged in full blossom. The drive to regional domination takes many forms — from escalating tensions with Israel to the prime minister's triumphal tour of North Africa — but with a specific focus on increasing Turkish power in the eastern

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Mediterranean. AKP ambitions have thus transformed the Turkish occupation of Cyprus from a sui generis problem into just one aspect of a larger issue.

Second, the June 2010 discovery of gas and oil reserves (“Leviathan”) in Israel’s Mediterranean Sea exclusive economic zone, right near the Cypriot EEZ, suddenly made Cyprus a player in the world energy market. Cypriots talk of 300 trillion cubic feet worth US\$4 trillion. Such numbers attract covetous gazes, especially from Ankara, which demands (via the TRNC) its share of future gas income. Further, the AKP’s escalating anti-Zionism combined with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s strategic ambitions suggest Turkish claims might extend into Israeli-controlled waters.

In conjunction, these two developments — growing Turkish ambitions and possible gas deposits in the trillions — link Cyprus and Israel in self-defense. Leading Greek Cypriot figures in the government, the media, and business told me during a just-concluded trip to the island about their urgent wish to build economic and security relations with Israel.

In the economic realm, a ranking Cypriot government official proposes five projects: a joint pipeline from the gas fields to Cyprus, followed by a liquidification plant, a methanol plant, a 1,000 megawatt electricity plan, and a strategic reserve, all located in Cyprus. A media tycoon suggests selling the gas reserves to Israel and letting its companies bear responsibility.

In the security realm, several interlocutors proposed a full-on alliance with Israel. Cyprus would gain from Israel’s much greater military, economic, and diplomatic prowess. Israel, which has already made protective efforts on behalf of Cyprus, would benefit from access to an airbase at Paphos, 185 miles (300 kilometers) from its shore, belonging to a European Union member.

Such an alliance would terminate the Cypriot legacy of non-alignment and low-key diplomacy designed to convince governments not to recognize the TRNC, though that strategy, arguably, has not brought it much benefit.

In the face of an over-confident and possibly messianic Turkish leadership that increasingly betrays rogue attributes, Washington, Brussels, Athens, and Moscow have important roles to play in encouraging Cypriot-Israeli relations and thereby diminishing the likelihood of AKP-led Turkish aggression.