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Echoes of Lepanto:
The Middle East Crisis and The Battle for Europe's Seas

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Empires have risen and collapsed around the Mediterranean, yet the geography that determined their fortunes has survived successive political orders. From the Ottoman struggle for maritime supremacy to the Crimean War, competition over the Levant, the Turkish Straits, and the Black Sea repeatedly drew distant powers into conflicts over commercial access and strategic resources. Today, Syria's renewed contacts with Hezbollah raise the prospect of restoring Iran's overland corridor to Lebanon, while Iranian intelligence networks threaten Israeli interests in Greece, Cyprus, and southern Europe. Disruption around Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb threatens European energy security, and competition over phosphates, gold, and critical minerals raises questions about who profits from scarcity. Militia-linked businesses exploit legitimate commerce, while renewed displacement threatens Mediterranean migration routes. Russia's operations in the Black Sea raise the possibility of coordinated maritime pressure with Iran and the Houthis. The Ottoman Empire disappeared, colonial governments withdrew, and Cold War alliances

dissolved, yet the ports and passages that once determined imperial power remain central to the security of Europe and the Middle East.

Lepanto and the Geography That Outlived Empires

On October 7, 1571, the Holy League confronted the Ottoman fleet in the Gulf of Patras, near Lepanto. Pope Pius V had assembled a coalition led by Spain and Venice, with Don John of Austria commanding its naval forces. The Ottoman conquest of Cyprus had threatened Venetian commercial interests and strengthened Ottoman influence across the eastern Mediterranean. Situated between Anatolia and the Levant, Cyprus had offered access to valuable trading routes and provided a base for naval operations. Venetian merchants depended on commerce with Ottoman territories, creating tensions between the republic's economic interests and its military commitments.

The Holy League destroyed much of the Ottoman fleet, capturing thousands of prisoners and undermining the perception of Ottoman naval invincibility. Yet the victory produced limited territorial gains. The Ottomans rebuilt their fleet and retained Cyprus, while Venice negotiated a separate peace in 1573 to protect its commercial relationships. Spain increasingly concentrated on other military commitments, and disagreements among the coalition's members undermined further operations. The republic's merchants had stronger incentives to restore trade than to finance another prolonged naval campaign.

Over the following centuries, Russian expansion around the Black Sea brought the Ottoman Empire into repeated confrontation with Moscow. Ottoman control over the Turkish Straits restricted Russian maritime access, while competition over territories surrounding the Black Sea generated successive wars. During the Crimean War of 1853–1856, Britain and France intervened against Russia partly because they feared Moscow's growing influence over Ottoman territories and strategic waterways. Their armies depended on maritime supply routes extending across the Mediterranean and into the Black Sea, imposing substantial logistical costs on governments already concerned about the commercial consequences of Russian expansion.

The Ottoman Empire eventually disappeared, while the development of the Suez Canal and modern energy infrastructure transformed the economic importance of established maritime passages. Cyprus acquired renewed significance through offshore gas

exploration and its proximity to Israel. The Turkish Straits remained essential to Russian maritime access, while European governments became increasingly dependent on energy shipments passing through the Mediterranean. The political map changed repeatedly, but the geography continued to reward governments capable of controlling maritime access and financing the infrastructure connecting regional markets.

Damascus and Iran's Mediterranean Corridor

Assad's overthrow disrupted Iran's established supply routes connecting Iraq to Lebanon, although many of the commercial intermediaries and former intelligence officials who managed those networks survived the regime's collapse. President Ahmed al-Sharaa's reliance on former Assad-era personnel raises questions about whether Damascus can prevent these individuals from restoring arrangements that previously facilitated Hezbollah's military procurement. Renewed contacts between Syrian authorities and Hezbollah representatives become particularly concerning given the continued influence of Iran-aligned Iraqi PMUs over border commerce.

Tehran would benefit from selective access through Syria even without formal cooperation from Damascus. Former regime officials could facilitate shipments through private commercial arrangements, while local commanders collect payments for allowing goods to cross poorly monitored borders. Hezbollah would gain opportunities to rebuild its weapons inventories, and Iranian intelligence services could recover access to Lebanese commercial networks. Israel would likely respond through additional interdiction operations inside Syria, potentially damaging infrastructure that Damascus needs for reconstruction.

The transitional Syrian authorities also face substantial financial pressure as they attempt to restore damaged infrastructure and rebuild state institutions. Former Assad-era businessmen could exploit reconstruction contracts to regain influence over transportation networks, while local commanders may accept payments for facilitating cargo movements. Even limited access through Syria would provide Hezbollah with opportunities to rebuild procurement channels, particularly where shipments involve dual-use components concealed within legitimate commercial cargoes.

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European governments supporting Syrian reconstruction should condition financial assistance on verifiable border enforcement and disclosure of companies receiving infrastructure contracts. Customs cooperation with Iraq and Lebanon would help identify suspicious shipments, while sanctions against individual facilitators could disrupt procurement networks without obstructing legitimate Syrian commerce. Cyprus and Greece should also examine whether companies linked to former Assad-era officials have acquired interests in regional shipping or port services.

Iran's Assassination Network in Southern Europe

Iranian intelligence services have previously recruited foreign nationals and criminal intermediaries to pursue Israeli targets abroad. Greece and Cyprus present attractive operating environments because of their proximity to Israel and the concentration of Israeli commercial interests. Previous European investigations into suspected Iranian-directed plots demonstrate the relevance of both countries to Tehran's overseas operations. Criminal networks operating across southeastern Europe provide potential access to local transportation and individuals familiar with the region.

Attempted kidnappings or assassinations could target Israeli executives and former security officials traveling for business. Such operations would create considerable difficulties for European counterintelligence agencies, particularly when perpetrators use intermediaries whose relationships with Iranian handlers remain concealed. Cyprus faces additional concerns because of its expanding security cooperation with Israel and proximity to Lebanon. Greece would encounter similar risks around commercial investments and tourist destinations, potentially affecting Israeli business activity if repeated security incidents undermine confidence in local protection.

The use of foreign recruits complicates investigations because operatives may have little direct contact with Iranian diplomatic personnel. Financial transfers through intermediaries and criminal networks can obscure the individuals directing an operation, while frequent travel across European borders allows suspects to exploit differences in national investigative procedures. Authorities also need to examine whether individuals recruited for surveillance activities subsequently receive instructions to carry out kidnappings or attacks.

Greek and Cypriot authorities should establish permanent joint investigative arrangements with Israeli security services, focusing on suspected foreign intelligence recruitment and financial transactions associated with criminal intermediaries. Europol could facilitate investigations extending into other European jurisdictions, while prosecutors should prioritize identifying the individuals directing operations rather than limiting cases to locally recruited suspects.

Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb, and Europe's Energy Bill

Iranian interference with Gulf shipping raises the cost of oil and LNG, while Houthi attacks near Bab al-Mandeb divert vessels around Africa. Longer voyages absorb tanker capacity and increase freight charges, even for cargoes originating outside the conflict zones. Egypt loses Suez Canal revenue, and Mediterranean refiners compete for alternative deliveries as transportation expenses rise. European gas buyers face additional pressure when cargoes intended for Asian markets become more attractive to traders, encouraging suppliers to redirect shipments toward higher-paying customers.

The disruption also affects agricultural production because natural gas provides an essential input for nitrogen-based fertilizer manufacturing. Higher gas prices increase production costs, while expensive maritime transportation raises the price of imported fertilizer. Mediterranean agricultural economies face particular difficulties when energy shortages coincide with reduced access to phosphate supplies or other chemical inputs.

Southern European governments should negotiate emergency LNG-sharing arrangements and coordinate strategic gas storage before shortages develop. Greece's LNG facilities and Italy's import infrastructure offer options for regional cooperation, while interconnectors require sufficient capacity to deliver supplies where demand rises. Egypt needs stronger maritime security cooperation around the Suez approaches, accompanied by financing arrangements that protect essential imports during periods of declining canal revenue.

Joint insurance guarantees for commercial shipping could reduce excessive risk premiums, provided participating governments establish credible protection arrangements. European authorities should also examine whether temporary increases in freight and insurance charges reflect verifiable security risks or commercial practices that exploit

uncertainty. Greater transparency in shipping costs would help governments identify where public support benefits essential commerce and where private operators capture additional profits.

Phosphates, Gold, and the Scarcity Premium

Morocco holds approximately 70 percent of known global phosphate reserves, making OCP strategically important to fertilizer markets. Trump's reported June suspension of countervailing duty collection offered temporary relief to Moroccan exporters, while the reported November Commerce determination retained the 20.04 percent subsidy rate relevant to the continuing trade review. OCP's reported shipment of approximately 54,000 tons to New Orleans in August illustrated the immediate commercial value of temporary relief, although continuing administrative proceedings left future access uncertain.

American farmers consequently face uncertainty over future import costs, while Russian fertilizer producers retain opportunities to compete for international contracts. Russian exporters have sought to expand their presence in markets where supply restrictions increase prices, with industry representatives discussing substantial additional export volumes. The continuing US trade dispute also affects Morocco's ability to negotiate long-term supply agreements despite its strategic relationship with Washington.

Phosphate supplies influence Mediterranean food security because North African agricultural producers depend on affordable fertilizer, while European manufacturers require stable access to chemical feedstocks. Morocco's proposed Atlantic gas pipeline offers another potential route for diversifying energy supplies, although financing and construction challenges remain substantial. Investment in the pipeline would connect West African gas resources to Moroccan infrastructure, potentially reducing dependence on maritime shipments passing through vulnerable chokepoints.

Gold and cobalt markets face their own pressures as conflict increases demand for secure inventories and complicates investment in mining operations. Companies controlling storage facilities or alternative transportation routes may benefit from temporary shortages, while politically connected intermediaries could exploit uncertainty to negotiate favorable acquisition terms. Cryptocurrency transactions provide additional

opportunities for sanctioned procurement networks to transfer funds across jurisdictions, particularly when financial institutions struggle to identify the ultimate beneficiaries.

Washington and European governments should examine the commercial effects of maintaining restrictions on strategically important Moroccan supplies while seeking to reduce Russian market influence. Investment agreements should disclose beneficial ownership and identify intermediaries receiving transaction fees. Allegations involving politically connected networks, including Kushner-linked interests, warrant examination through documented financial relationships. Financial regulators should investigate cryptocurrency transactions connected to sanctioned procurement networks, particularly where digital assets facilitate payments between otherwise restricted counterparties.

Militia Capital and the Mediterranean Marketplace

Iran-aligned Iraqi militias influence transportation businesses and border commerce, while Hezbollah-linked networks have historically used international trading arrangements to support procurement. Syria's reconstruction offers former Assad-era businessmen opportunities to regain commercial influence through contracts involving damaged infrastructure. Local officials facing financial pressure may accept arrangements that provide immediate revenue while allowing sanctioned organizations to retain access to commercial networks.

Russian sanctions-evasion networks operating through the Black Sea and Türkiye offer possible connections for Iranian procurement organizations. Companies trading through the Caucasus may handle legitimate cargoes alongside transactions involving restricted equipment. Businesses involved in shipping or warehousing could facilitate the movement of dual-use goods through complex ownership arrangements, particularly where customs enforcement remains inconsistent.

The involvement of commercial intermediaries also complicates sanctions enforcement because legitimate businesses may become connected to restricted transactions without understanding the ultimate destination of their goods. Companies operating through several jurisdictions can exploit differences in reporting requirements, while frequent changes in ownership make it difficult for investigators to identify individuals controlling the transactions.

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European authorities should require stronger beneficial ownership disclosure from shipping companies operating in sensitive ports, with particular scrutiny of businesses repeatedly changing registration or concealing final customers. Customs agencies in Greece and Cyprus should investigate suspicious cargo movements and coordinate with European financial authorities to identify companies associated with sanctioned procurement networks. Reconstruction financing for Syria should include independent audits of contractors and subcontractors, accompanied by restrictions on companies linked to former regime intelligence structures.

Migration and Europe's Political Vulnerabilities

Renewed conflict in Lebanon or Syria would increase pressure on Cyprus and Greece as displaced families seek routes toward Europe. Economic deterioration could encourage additional departures even during periods of reduced fighting, while smugglers would exploit restrictions on legal movement by charging higher prices for dangerous crossings. Cyprus would face particular difficulties if arrivals from Lebanon increased faster than its reception capacity, potentially producing disputes with other EU governments over responsibility for asylum processing.

European governments should expand maritime rescue coordination and establish contingency agreements for distributing asylum-processing responsibilities. Financial assistance to Lebanon should support essential services and reduce incentives for displacement, with independent monitoring to prevent diversion by armed organizations. Intelligence agencies should investigate criminal groups profiting from migrant smuggling, especially where financial evidence connects them to sanctioned actors.

Russia and Iran could exploit public disagreements over migration through information campaigns designed to undermine confidence in European institutions. Disinformation surrounding migrant arrivals could aggravate domestic political disputes and complicate cooperation between governments already facing economic pressure from higher energy prices. European authorities should monitor coordinated foreign influence operations while publishing reliable information about migration figures and the resources available to local communities.

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From Crimea to Bab al-Mandeb

Russian attacks against Ukrainian ports have already affected international commodity markets. Iranian pressure around Hormuz and Houthi operations near Bab al-Mandeb create opportunities for simultaneous disruption, particularly if Moscow and Tehran expand intelligence sharing concerning commercial shipping. Russian surveillance capabilities could provide information about vessel movements, while Iranian networks could help identify economically significant targets. Evidence of coordinated targeting would require examination of communications and operational patterns, although the established military relationship between Russia and Iran provides grounds for closer monitoring.

Türkiye's authority over warship passage through the Turkish Straits gives Ankara considerable influence over Black Sea naval activity. Its commercial relationships with Russia complicate demands for stronger enforcement, while NATO partners seek greater protection for Ukrainian maritime exports. Ankara's disputes with Greece and Cyprus over maritime jurisdiction also create difficulties for broader eastern Mediterranean security cooperation. European governments should account for these competing interests when developing contingency arrangements for simultaneous disruptions affecting the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean.

Undersea telecommunications cables and offshore energy installations face potential threats from sabotage and unmanned systems. Repairing damaged infrastructure can take considerable time, particularly when specialized vessels must operate near conflict zones. Greece and Cyprus should coordinate surveillance of offshore facilities with Israel, while Black Sea governments expand monitoring of infrastructure connecting regional communications networks.

NATO's maritime security planning should incorporate scenarios involving simultaneous attacks against commercial shipping and offshore infrastructure. Additional investment in counter-drone defenses around critical ports would help reduce vulnerabilities to relatively inexpensive attacks. European governments should also establish emergency arrangements for repairing damaged communications systems and protecting specialized vessels operating near threatened infrastructure.

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Lessons from Lepanto

Venice negotiated a separate peace with the Ottomans in 1573 because its merchants depended on access to eastern markets, despite the Holy League's victory two years earlier. Spain increasingly concentrated on other military commitments, while the Ottomans rebuilt their fleet and retained Cyprus. The coalition's members had entered the conflict with different economic interests, and those disagreements eventually undermined further military cooperation.

Greece, Cyprus, and Israel now face commercial pressures surrounding energy investments and maritime infrastructure, particularly when private investors demand protection against regional instability. Their recently expanded trilateral defense cooperation should lead to a permanent maritime security center connecting their naval headquarters and coast guards. Its personnel should maintain a shared picture of vessel movements around offshore energy installations and strategically important shipping routes, with procedures for requesting surveillance support during emergencies. Each government should assign dedicated officers and establish clear rules governing the exchange of classified information.

Israel's maritime surveillance capabilities and Greece's naval infrastructure could support operations around Cyprus, whose proximity to Lebanon increases its vulnerability to disruptions originating in the Levant. Joint exercises should involve attacks against offshore gas installations and damage to submarine communications cables, including scenarios in which commercial shipping simultaneously requires emergency assistance. Dedicated counter-drone systems and electronic warfare equipment should protect selected ports and energy facilities, with regular testing of emergency communications.

Türkiye's military presence in the occupied region of northern Cyprus and its disputes with Greece over maritime jurisdiction require separate contingency planning. Turkish objections to the Great Sea Interconnector and competing claims over offshore exploration have complicated infrastructure development. Greece and Cyprus should coordinate protective monitoring around survey vessels and construction sites, while Israel provides technical assistance for maritime surveillance and emergency

communications. The three governments should seek advance EU and US diplomatic support for sensitive construction phases and agree on procedures for responding to interference without allowing an isolated incident to trigger an uncontrolled confrontation.

Offshore energy platforms and submarine communications cables require joint protection arrangements extending beyond conventional naval patrols. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel should establish agreements for rapid deployment of specialized repair vessels, with replacement equipment stored at designated facilities and security escorts available when necessary. Their governments should identify alternative communications routes and negotiate emergency restoration contracts with private operators, reducing the time required to recover from deliberate damage.

Israeli and Greek defense manufacturers could establish joint production and maintenance facilities for maritime surveillance systems, with Cyprus participating in operational testing and procurement. Shared inventories of replacement components would reduce dependence on lengthy overseas supply chains during emergencies. The three governments should establish measurable readiness requirements for restoring damaged coastal radar installations and repairing communications infrastructure, supported by annual exercises that test the availability of personnel and equipment.

Commercial ports require comparable preparations. Greece and Cyprus should negotiate emergency arrangements allowing vessels carrying essential goods to redirect cargo when a major port becomes unavailable, while Israel coordinates access to its own facilities according to operational requirements. Joint discussions with shipping insurers could establish common procedures for communicating verified threats and reducing uncertainty over vessel protection. European financing should support infrastructure improvements that preserve access to energy imports during regional crises, particularly where private operators face substantial security expenses.

Cyprus also needs additional capacity to respond to renewed fighting in Lebanon or Israel. Greece could provide transport aircraft and temporary reception facilities, while Israeli authorities coordinate medical evacuation arrangements and information concerning civilians requiring assistance. Joint exercises should test the movement of evacuees through damaged ports and the restoration of essential services after prolonged power

disruptions. Egypt could participate in selected humanitarian and maritime security arrangements, particularly where operations affect shipping near the Suez Canal.

The Crimean War drew Britain and France into a prolonged military confrontation with Russia over Ottoman territories and strategic access. Modern technology allows armed organizations to threaten commercial shipping with relatively inexpensive drones, while financial markets transmit the consequences of regional disruption across continents. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel should establish a common program for protecting energy infrastructure and maritime commerce, with the US supporting selected projects through the existing 3+1 framework. France could contribute specialized maritime capabilities under separate agreements, particularly where protection of EU infrastructure aligns with its Mediterranean security commitments.

Southern European governments should coordinate emergency LNG-sharing arrangements and strategic gas storage, reducing their vulnerability to simultaneous disruption around Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb. Italy and Greece should identify available import capacity and establish procedures for redirecting cargoes during shortages, while Cyprus explores arrangements for accessing alternative supplies. Egypt should participate in discussions concerning maritime security near the Suez Canal and financing arrangements that protect essential imports when canal revenues decline.

European governments should also examine the strategic consequences of maintaining trade restrictions on Moroccan phosphate exports while seeking to reduce dependence on Russian fertilizer producers. Longer-term procurement agreements with Morocco could provide greater stability for agricultural producers, while investment in fertilizer storage facilities would help manage temporary disruptions. Morocco's proposed Atlantic gas pipeline deserves additional consideration as a potential diversification project, although financing commitments should depend on commercially credible demand forecasts and transparent procurement arrangements.

Financial authorities should investigate the ownership structures behind companies profiting from sanctions evasion and commodity shortages. European customs agencies should coordinate with financial intelligence units to identify businesses repeatedly changing registration or concealing final customers, particularly where transactions

involve restricted industrial components. Reconstruction contracts in Syria should include disclosure requirements for subcontractors and independent audits capable of identifying connections to former Assad-era procurement networks. Cryptocurrency transactions associated with sanctioned organizations should receive additional scrutiny where investigators identify evidence of illicit procurement or concealed beneficial ownership.

The Holy League's commanders had faced an identifiable Ottoman fleet, while contemporary threats can involve criminal intermediaries and commercially registered vessels whose activities conceal the individuals directing them. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel should expand their existing security cooperation to include joint investigations of suspected foreign intelligence recruitment and financial transfers associated with criminal networks. Prosecutors should pursue the organizers and financiers of attempted assassinations or kidnappings, while Europol coordinates investigations extending across European jurisdictions.

European governments should prepare for increased migration from Lebanon and Syria by establishing contingency agreements for distributing asylum-processing responsibilities and supporting essential services in countries hosting displaced populations. Cyprus requires additional reception capacity and maritime rescue resources, while Greece could provide temporary facilities during sudden increases in arrivals. Independent monitoring of humanitarian funding would reduce opportunities for diversion by armed organizations, while financial investigations should target criminal groups profiting from migrant smuggling.

Within six months, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel should agree on the personnel and equipment assigned to their maritime security center and identify the facilities requiring immediate defensive improvements. A jointly financed infrastructure protection program should cover offshore energy installations and submarine communications systems, with annual readiness assessments conducted under agreed operational standards. Their defense ministries should establish procedures for deploying emergency assistance across national jurisdictions and maintaining essential commercial operations during simultaneous disruptions.

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Venice's merchants eventually persuaded their government to restore trade with the Ottoman Empire despite the Holy League's victory. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel should make security guarantees part of infrastructure financing agreements and require operators to maintain credible emergency response capabilities. The Great Sea Interconnector, offshore gas installations, and commercial ports would benefit from arrangements allowing construction and operations to continue despite hostile interference. Their governments should commit funding to protective equipment and personnel before another confrontation forces them into emergency negotiations, when commercial disruptions have already raised costs and constrained their available options.