

Hezbollah Threatens Cyprus: Capabilities, Intentions, and Potential Consequences

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Jun 21, 2024

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Brief Analysis

If Hezbollah's conflict with Israel widens, the group could use its large missile and drone arsenal to attack Cyprus, the allied military presence based there, and a wide array of shipping and energy assets in the East Mediterranean.

When Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech this week commemorating a senior commander killed by Israel, his remarks were noteworthy for both their exceptionally menacing tone and their focus on the East Mediterranean. The headline from the June 19 address was his threat to strike Cyprus if it allows Israel to use the island's air bases or other military facilities during a future war in Lebanon—an understandable point of media focus given the republic's status as a European Union member state. Just as important, however, he indicated that Hezbollah would attack Mediterranean targets belonging to Israel—a scenario that could put other countries' vessels and assets at risk.

According to Nasrallah, Israel is already “suffering in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea,” referring to **ongoing maritime attacks** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/maritime-spotlight>) by another Iran-backed regional militia, the Yemeni Houthis. “But if they start a war with Lebanon,” he continued, “what will happen to them in the Mediterranean Sea is completely different.” Exactly what Hezbollah might do is uncertain—during the 2006 war in Lebanon, the group surprised Israel by hitting its naval corvette *Hanit* with an antiship missile while it was patrolling waters near Beirut, killing several crew members. At minimum, a future war would likely see Hezbollah target Israeli military and commercial shipping in the East Mediterranean, along with the country’s lucrative **offshore natural gas facilities** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israeli-gas-field-near-lebanon-starts-production>). Other countries could face threats as well, from foreign ships that call at Israeli ports to U.S. Navy vessels deployed to help defend the country **against missile attacks** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-sustainable-are-defense-and-deterrence-methods-light-irans-attack>) from Lebanon or Iran.

Why Cyprus?

Nasrallah’s threat to Cyprus was not random—the republic has long maintained close ties with Israel, much to Hezbollah’s irritation. In recent years, the island has hosted multiple joint air defense drills and annual special forces **exercises** (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/20/middleeast/hezbollah-warns-cyprus-israel-gaza-war-explainer-intl/index.html>) with Israel focused on potential threats from Hezbollah and Iran. The group has also (falsely) accused the British military of launching air defense missiles from its bases in Cyprus to counter drones launched at Israel during **Iran’s major April 13 assault** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/denial-or-punishment-us-israel-debate-about-how-best-deter-iran>). On the counterterrorism front, a Cypriot court indicted a Lebanese suspect with a Swedish passport in 2013 for planning an attack against Israeli interests on Hezbollah’s behalf.

Nasrallah’s threat should also be viewed in the context of wartime statements by Iran and its proxies about disrupting vital shipping lanes to Israel through the East Mediterranean. As early as November 1, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei **called** (<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=54271>) for a joint Islamic effort to block oil and food shipments to Israel in response to the Gaza war. Since then, the Houthis, Iraqi Shia militias, and other members of Tehran’s so-called “axis of resistance” have threatened Israeli ports and shipping and launched attacks in their direction. For example, several Iraqi militia drones downed over the Golan Heights were believed to be **headed for Haifa port** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/anti-israel-surge-iraqi-militants-metrics-and-trends>).

In January, the Cypriot government **affirmed** (<https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/news/cyprus-affirms-neutrality-amidst-uk-air-strikes-on-houthi-positions>) its neutrality and non-involvement in any foreign military operations after aircraft launched from the British base at Akrotiri participated in counterstrikes against the Houthis. According to the 1960 Treaty of Establishment, the Cypriot government has no control over the activities of sovereign British bases on its territory—notably, however, it is obligated to help ensure the security of these facilities. The treaty also obliges Greece and Turkey to “consult and co-operate in the common defense” of Cyprus. Similarly, the island’s EU membership could technically require other member states to join in its defense if it is attacked.

At present, Cyprus and its environs are not protected by a robust, multilayered air and missile defense network. The government **reportedly** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/cyprus-set-to-buy-iron-dome-from-israel-report/>) reached a tentative agreement in 2022 to purchase Iron Dome systems from Israel, though it is unclear if and when they will be delivered. The island could therefore be vulnerable to Hezbollah missiles absent the deployment of British or NATO guided-missile destroyers. This scenario should be particularly troubling to Washington given the large allied military presence in Cyprus, which includes a few thousand British troops, more than a hundred U.S. Air

Force personnel, and a detachment of U-2 surveillance aircraft from the 1st Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron. According to various media outlets, the Akrotiri base has been extensively involved in facilitating air transport of military supplies to Israel during the Gaza war.

Hezbollah Capabilities and Intentions

Hezbollah has a range of options to back up Nasrallah's threat. The group is believed to possess a large arsenal of highly accurate surface-to-surface missiles mainly of the Iranian-made Fateh family, which cover ranges from 250 to 1,000 kilometers while carrying a 450-kilogram high-explosive warhead. It also likely has antiship ballistic and cruise missiles similar in quality and quantity to what the Houthis have used against international vessels in the Red Sea region since November—including the highly advanced Russian Yakhont, a supersonic weapon with a range of 300 kilometers.

Hezbollah would therefore have little problem targeting Britain's Akrotiri air base, its nearby PLUTO II over-the-horizon surveillance radar, or its Troodos radar and signals intelligence collection station. Fateh-type missiles could reach these targets from either Lebanon's mountainous coastal areas (about 250 kilometers away) or as far east as Baalbek in the Beqa Valley, giving Hezbollah ample flexibility to protect its launchers from counterstrikes. The group also has large stocks of one-way attack drones capable of reaching targets around the island, from anchored ships to inland facilities.

Like the recent Houthi attacks against Israel, the vast majority of any future Hezbollah missile and drone launches against Cyprus could be intercepted with the help of well-coordinated air and missile defense warships, patrolling fighter jets, and timely intelligence—assuming such assets were already deployed in the area. Overwhelming these assets and the island's other land- and sea-based defenses would require a very large number of missiles and drones, which Hezbollah may be reticent to devote for fear of depleting the arsenal it would simultaneously be using against Israel.

Indeed, it is unclear if Nasrallah is truly willing to follow through on his tough talk against Cyprus, not least given the risk of drawing more EU countries into a potential conflict. Yet even if an attack on the island is not forthcoming, the threat alone may be sufficient to keep Cyprus on the sidelines of any future war in Lebanon.

Policy Implications

Nasrallah's threat highlights the very real prospect of the Hezbollah-Israel conflict broadening into the Mediterranean. If a wider war erupts, Israeli military and commercial traffic at sea would certainly be at risk given the militia's large antiship arsenal and track record of tactical surprise (e.g., for the 2006 *Hanit* attack, the militia reportedly exploited Lebanese Armed Forces naval radar assets to target the ship). Israel's offshore energy assets would be at risk as well, including property owned by the U.S. corporation Chevron. Beyond Israel, commercial shipping in the East Mediterranean could be directly threatened or caught in the crossfire, including humanitarian aid shipments from Cyprus to Gaza. Even the Houthis could conceivably launch solidarity attacks at targets in these distant waters given their long-range suicide drones and missiles.

The Biden administration has devoted great efforts to preventing further escalation between Israel and Hezbollah, recently deploying the USS *Eisenhower* carrier strike group to the East Mediterranean in a bid to deter the group. Publicly standing with Israel and Cyprus is an important step in this time of crisis. Notably, Nasrallah's speech came just one day after the State Department hosted the island's foreign minister and announced the first-ever strategic dialogue between the two countries. In planning this dialogue—slated to begin before year's end—officials should discuss how best to balance Nicosia's concerns about neutrality with the pressing need to counter Hezbollah and Iran's proven military and terrorist threats in the area. Now that Europe has been directly threatened by Iran's Lebanese proxy, Washington should also urge the EU and all its member states to denounce Hezbollah's brazen

threats and designate it as a terrorist organization, as many other countries around the world have already done.

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