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### **Cyprus and Lebanon: military aid, energy uncertainties.**

The first Greece-Cyprus-Lebanon trilateral meeting will be held by the end of the year, as confirmed by Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades visiting Lebanon on June 13.

During his visit, President Anastasiades met his Lebanese counterpart Michel Aoun, the Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri and the Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai.

Energy stands at the core of this relationship. But with regard to this point, relations between Cyprus and Lebanon are complicated by the Israeli-Lebanese rift. In the Levant Basin, Nicosia and Beirut aim to explore gas cooperation, even though question marks remain.

For instance, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreement signed between Cyprus and Lebanon has not been ratified yet by Beirut's parliament, since the Cypriot-Israeli EEZ agreement includes maritime areas that Lebanon considers under its sovereignty: Israel and Lebanon are also divided on maritime borders demarcation. On the other hand, Cyprus' foreign minister Ioannis Kasoulidis declared recently that Nicosia will support Lebanon vis-à-vis Israel in the oil-blocks dispute. Notwithstanding the uncertainty, the Hariri government recently passed three decrees in order to allow the start of exploration activities, after three years of delays. Three of the five blocks ready for license are located in the maritime area contested by Israel.

As a matter of fact, bilateral disagreements among Cyprus, Lebanon and Israel weaken Nicosia's chances to play the mediator role between Beirut and Tel Aviv, as Lebanon asked for. Instead, Cyprus' geographic position and good ties with both states could help Nicosia to carve-out a political space for niche diplomacy in the Levant.

During Anastasiades' visit in Beirut, Cyprus and Lebanon called for joint cooperation against terrorism. In this framework, Nicosia announced a 15 million euros military aid package to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which includes arms delivery. The deal aims to enhance LAF's resilience against jihadi threats coming from Lebanon's north-eastern border with Syria (given also Hezbollah's military participation to the Syrian war). In 2016, Cyprus and Lebanon signed a military cooperation agreement.

Cyprus' militaries are already involved in the Unifil mission: beyond the small number of soldiers deployed (two), the isle is a remarkable facility for the peacekeeping operation, especially for its naval component, with the availability of the Limassol port. In 2006, when the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel erupted, the isle was also a hub for humanitarian assistance.

First of all, Cyprus' military aid package to LAF is a highly symbolic gesture in the framework of intensified sub-regional security cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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