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As Divisions Harden, Is Time Running Out to Reunite Cyprus?

Jonathan Gorvett | Tuesday, April 2, 2019

A U.N peacekeeper walks near a checkpoint intended to link Cyprus' breakaway Turkish Cypriot north and internationally recognized south, Dherynia, April 27, 2017 (AP photo by Petros Karadjias).

FAMAGUSTA, Cyprus—On a Monday morning last November, cars began queuing at checkpoints marking the buffer zone between the north and south of this long-divided island. For the first time in eight years, the authorities had agreed to create two new crossings—at the village of Dherynia, in the east, and in Lefke, a town in the west.

The crossings opened at noon. While Al Jazeera noted (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/border-crossings-open-divided-cyprus-8-years-181112133918947.html) some "arguments breaking out" among the onlookers in Dherynia, the openings took place without incident. Elizabeth Spehar, the United Nations special representative and head of the peacekeeping force in Cyprus, which was established more than half a century ago, was quick to declare victory. "Today is a good day for Cyprus," she said (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46182370) in a statement.

In the long, frustrating push toward the reunification of Cyprus, good days have been hard to come by. Blue helmets first arrived in 1964 to quell violence between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots that broke out following the collapse of a power-sharing system implemented when the island became independent from Britain in 1960. Ten years later, putschists backed by Athens ousted the first president of Cyprus, Makarios III, and replaced him with a puppet regime whose goal was to deliver the island to Greece.

The U.N. denounced the coup as illegal. In response, Turkey staged a military intervention and seized the northern third of the island, setting up the 112-mile dividing line that remains in place to this day. The two new crossings that opened in November brought the total number of crossings to just nine; the rest of the dividing line is impermeable, marked by barbed wire, oil drums filled with concrete and faded signs warning of mines and off-limits military zones.

Turkey still refers to northern Cyprus as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, or TRNC, but it is the

only country that recognizes the north's 1983 declaration of independence from the Republic of Cyprus, or ROC. Various diplomatic initiatives intended to facilitate the reunification of Cyprus have come up short; the latest round of talks, held at the Swiss mountain resort town of Crans-Montana, ended without an agreement in mid-2017.

Famagusta, a town in the north situated 32 miles east of Nicosia, the capital, and five miles north of Dherynia, starkly illustrates the story of 45 years of division. In July and August 1974, Turkish warplanes dropped 500-pound bombs on the town's luxurious waterfront, which was once one of the Mediterranean's most popular tourist spots. The ruins of three Famagusta hotels—the Florida, the Salamia and the Aphrodite—are still there, sitting behind a fence erected by the Turkish army and casting long shadows in the sun.

Beyond the hotels lies mile after mile of apartment blocks, villas, restaurants, cafes and casinos that were abandoned by their Greek Cypriot owners over just a few dark days in August 1974, when Turkish tanks broke through Greek Cypriot defenses around the city. In the subsequent rout, some 40,000 men, women and children fled down the single, narrow road south to Dherynia or onto a nearby British army base.

A white U.N. observation post south of the abandoned city marks the buffer zone—a strip of land a quarter-mile wide. In the distance, a Greek flag and the flag of the ROC fly over the de facto border of the south—the limit of the ROC's effective control.

There is little reason to believe that the status quo in Cyprus will be disrupted anytime soon. Since the collapse of the talks in Crans-Montana in 2017, the leaders of the north and south, Mustafa Akinci and Nikos Anastasiades, have met only twice—last October and again in February—to explore the possibility of arranging for fresh negotiations.

But there are a number of reasons why political leaders both on and beyond Cyprus would like to see the dispute resolved. First, there is no escaping the fact that Cyprus is situated in a volatile region, surrounded not just by Turkey and Greece—both members of NATO—but also Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Tensions in Cyprus can thus have far-reaching geopolitical implications, especially given the role of Cyprus as an important intelligence-gathering center for both the U.S. and the U.K.

There are also potential economic dividends to reunifying the island. In February, Exxon-Mobil announced a large natural gas discovery (https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/28/exxonmobil-makes-big-natural-gas-discovery-off-the-coast-of-cyprus.html) off the coast of Cyprus—its biggest find in two years. Yet the relevant waters are the subject of competing claims by Greece, Turkey, the ROC and the TNRC.

> ***The status quo can sometimes seem immutable in Cyprus, but the incentives to keep trying for a resolution are as powerful as ever.***

For the general population of the north, reunification would bring an end to decades of isolation, given that their "state" is currently only recognized by Turkey. "This means we can't go anywhere or do anything without our big brother," says Hamit Arkan, a shop owner in Famagusta. "You want to fly somewhere, you must go via Istanbul. You want to import something, it has to come in via a Turkish port. It means Ankara really runs things here, not us."

And for Greek Cypriots who fled south in 1974, reunification would mean a chance to return home, finally, after 45 years. "I come here every year and look across at where I grew up," says Akridis Pavlou, a retired Greek Cypriot chemist, as he stands on the fourth-floor terrace of an apartment building in Dherynia, from where the abandoned tower blocks of Famagusta can be seen a few miles away. "It is my heart, my home. I want it back. I want to die in my own house, where I belong."

Sticking Points

The Turkish invasion of 1974 resulted in the mass displacement of around 265,000 people, according to U.N. estimates (https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3bd98d542.pdf)—around one-third of the island's population at the time. Some 200,000 Greek Cypriots living in the north fled south, while around 65,000 Turkish Cypriots in the south fled north.

The plight of the internally displaced, and the question of whether they will one day have the right to return to their properties, has been one of the main sticking points during U.N.-backed negotiations.

After 1974, some abandoned homes in both the north and the south were given to displaced people. Old Greek Cypriot villas in Famagusta, for example, are now home to Turkish Cypriots from southern cities like Paphos and Limassol. By the same token, on a stroll through Limassol's old town, one can see the faded lettering of an "Ottoman Bank" above the doorway of a flashy Greek Cypriot restaurant.

Over time, though, many of the abandoned properties have been demolished or have deteriorated to the point where they are no longer habitable. In many of these cases, the former owners are seeking compensation.

The property issue has led to a steady stream of international and European court cases and rulings, largely against Turkey. The most well-known is a case brought before the European Court of Human Rights in 1996 by Titina Loizidou, a displaced Greek Cypriot. She successfully argued that Turkey was preventing her from accessing her home in the north, violating her property rights. Six years later, Turkey paid her over $1 million (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3257880.stm) in compensation, after securing an agreement from the Council of Europe that the case would not set a precedent.

If displaced Greek Cypriots like Loizidou were to return to the north, they might find it difficult to recognize. The effects of Turkish investment are easy to see along the northern coastline. This area was once some of the most undeveloped land on the whole island. Now it features marinas and holiday homes owned by wealthy families from Istanbul and Ankara. The TRNC is also home to 17 universities that host around 81,000 students (https://mfa.gov.ct.tr/81000-students-are-studying-in-trnc-universities/), mainly of Turkish, African and Asian origin, many of whom stay on after graduation, sucked in by the island's obvious charms.

Many Greek Cypriots accuse Turkey of purposely altering the demographic balance in the north in order to consolidate control. Turkish Cypriots concur, claiming that this effort has also facilitated the migration of religious Turks from the mainland who, they say, have different values from those who were born on the island. "We have a different outlook than mainland Turks," says Turkish Cypriot Harkan Atiklar, a teacher and a native of Famagusta. "We aren't religious. We drink. We see ourselves as European. Turkey doesn't like that, and so they are trying to make us a minority here, in our own land."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is greeted by Turkish Cypriots as he arrives in the breakaway Turkish Cypriot northern part of Cyprus' divided capital, Nicosia, July 10, 2018 (Presidency Press Service photo via AP Images).

The Turkish population has also been inflated by the 30,000-strong Turkish military garrison, which today accounts for roughly 10 percent (http://www.devplan.org/Ist_yillik/IST-YILLIK-2017.pdf) of the north's population. The soldiers' presence here is considered crucial by Turkey and its supporters in the TRNC, who argue that in 1974 the Turkish army's invasion prevented a genocide of Turkish Cypriots by the Greek Cypriot police, the National Guard and a right-wing militia known as EOKA-B. After all, the coup that took place that year was led by Nikos Sampson, who was notorious for having previously advocated for the elimination of Turkish Cypriots. And the EOKA-B did indeed carry out massacres of Turkish Cypriot villagers—atrocities that were eventually documented by the U.N.

For Greek Cypriots, however, the Turkish army's presence is cause for concern. In response, the ROC has implemented compulsory military service for all men while approving cripplingly high defense budgets; in 1992, defense spending exceeded 9 percent of GDP, though it is now down to below 2 percent.

The debate over the Turkish military's continued presence in Cyprus highlights an issue central to reunification talks: the Treaty of Guarantee, which was part of the settlement that established Cypriot

independence in 1960. The treaty gave Britain, Turkey and Greece the right to militarily intervene on the island, either collectively or individually, if any attempt was made to join Cyprus either to Greece—one of Sampson's aims—or to Turkey.

Turkey continues to cite the treaty when explaining its actions in Cyprus. "We are in the TRNC in accordance with the 1960 agreement that gives us the authority to intervene," Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Faruk Kaymakci told a meeting (https://pio.mfa.gov.ct.tr/en/kaymakci-turkey-is-in-cyprus-in-accordance-with-the-1960-agreement/) last December of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee in Istanbul.
Britain and Greece, for their part, seem less attached to the treaty's terms. Britain has declared that it is willing to give up its rights under the treaty in the event of a settlement, provided this does not mean giving up its two military bases on the island, known as the Sovereign Base Areas, or SBAs, which are located in the ROC. Greece has made similar pledges in the past. Turkey remains steadfast, however, arguing that it must retain the right to place troops in Cyprus to counterbalance the island's Greek Cypriot majority.

A final issue that has plagued the negotiations has been the disagreement over what a future reunified state should actually look like. The stated goal during various rounds of negotiations has been to establish a bi-communal, bi-zonal, federated state. Yet, as ever, the devil has been in the details. The most controversial questions concern the amount of autonomy that should be granted to the Turkish and Greek Cypriot zones, how much power should be granted to the federal government, and who would lead the federal government. Because Turkish Cypriots are a minority on the island—accounting for roughly 300,000 of 1.2 million total people—they have tended to seek more guarantees, and even vetoes, in federal institutions, conditions the Greek Cypriot majority has rejected.

The Benefits of a Settlement

Finding a way through these thorny issues is highly challenging and has so far proved impossible. But the incentives to keep trying are as powerful as ever.

For Turkish Cypriots, isolation has been profoundly cumbersome. Since its declaration of independence in 1983, the TRNC has been under international embargo. This has meant that most of its exports and imports, as well as incoming and outgoing flights, have to go via Turkey, the only country to recognize it. The TRNC's dependence on Turkey is further underscored by a major annual subsidy from Ankara of around $500 million, representing some 6-7 percent of the TRNC's GDP. The TRNC even gets its drinking water piped in from Turkey.

Because Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004, a settlement could potentially give Turkish Cypriots full access to European markets, lessening their dependence on Ankara. This would be especially meaningful for people like Atiklar, the teacher from Famagusta. "We want to live normal lives, as

European citizens, able to travel and do business like anyone else," he says.

For Greek Cypriots, a settlement similarly promises stability and normalcy, as well as the return of some of their lost land and properties in the north. For many of those who fled in 1974, memories of their abandoned home and way of life are still a source of torment.

"It never goes away," says Despina Pericles, 84, a former resident of Famagusta now living in Limassol. "I want to return home before I die. I want my city back."

The attachment to abandoned homes and land left behind in the north is so strong that, throughout the south, displaced Greek Cypriots participate in local governments-in-exile that hold regular meetings and elections for positions like mayor.

And then there are the potential economic benefits of reunification.

A 2010 study (https://cyprus.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=1171) by the Peace Research Institute Oslo calculated that a settlement would generate an average of 12,000 euros extra per year for each family on the island, create 33,000 new jobs and raise GDP growth by 3 percent. Factors such as demilitarization, the removal of internal barriers to trade and transport, greater economies of scale and the ability of the north to attract international investment would all contribute to this boom.

There is also the question of revenues from natural gas reserves, which have been on the radar of energy firms for the better part of a decade.

> ***There has been a remarkable surge in natural gas discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean, but exploiting this potential remains a challenge while the Cyprus dispute persists.***

Back in 2011, Noble Energy discovered (https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/noble-energy-announces-significant-natural-gas-discovery-offshore-republic-of-cyprus-136305648.html) the Aphrodite gas field, which is located 160 kilometers south of Cyprus in waters that fall within the 200-kilometer exclusive economic zone, or EEZ, claimed by the ROC. In 2018, Italy's ENI discovered more gas (https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/news/newsroom/news-releases/2019/0228_exxonmobil-makes-natural-gas-discovery-offshore-cyprus) in the nearby Calypso field, while Exxon-Mobil has been conducting exploratory drilling in the same

region—the site of its February discovery.

These finds are part of a remarkable surge in natural gas discovery and exploitation in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is now home to substantial Israeli and Egyptian fields in waters adjacent to the Cypriot reserves.

Exploiting this potential, however, remains challenging while the Cyprus dispute persists. Turkey and the TRNC both have claims to territory that the ROC includes within its EEZ. This creates security risks for international oil companies; in February 2018, Turkish destroyers threatened (http://www.ekathimerini.com/226092/article/ekathimerini/news/turkish-ships-threaten-to-sink-enis-drill-vessel) to ram an ENI-commissioned survey ship, which ultimately backed off its exploration attempt.

A settlement could go a long way toward mitigating these risks, allowing the full and peaceful exploitation of what may turn out to be a significant resource.

What Sort of Cyprus?

A particularly frustrating feature of the various rounds of inconclusive settlement talks is that both sides have been open to making a deal, but never at the same time.

For many years, the Turkish Cypriot leader was the Turkish nationalist politician Rauf Denktas, who became widely known as "Mr. No" for his refusal to approve any progress toward an agreement, even when Greek Cypriot leaders like Glafkos Clerides (https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/16/world/europe/glafkos-clerides-greek-cypriot-leader-who-sought-unification-is-dead-at-94.html) offered significant concessions.

On the Greek side, Clerides' successor, Tassos Papadopolous, came from a hard-line Greek nationalist background and refused to support the 2004 Annan Plan (https://cyprus-mail.com/2016/12/29/peace-plans-2004-annan-plan/)—the closest the island has yet come to a settlement—even though the Turkish Cypriot negotiator at the time, Mehmet Ali Talat, was in favor of it. That deal was raitified by the Turkish Cypriot population in a referendum, but rejected by Greek Cypriots.

In 2015, Mustafa Akinci, who supports a settlement, was elected as leader of the Turkish Cypriots two years into the presidency of pro-settlement Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades. Philip Hammond, then the British foreign secretary, declared on the heels of Akinci's win that he had never seen "the stars as optimistically aligned as they are now."

There was a widespread sense that the long-term trends—including the growing "Turkification" of the north and the dying off of those old enough to remember a time when Turkish and Greek Cypriots lived together—meant it was "now or never."

This urgency, however, was not enough to prevent the collapse of the talks at Crans-Montana, an outcome that left pro-settlement parties both on and off the island despondent.

Greek Cypriots wait at a checkpoint to cross into the Turkish part of Nicosia, April 27, 2003 (Photo by Mustafa Sagiroglu for Anatolia via AP Images).

After the talks ended, Mevlut Cavasoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, said (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-conflict/cyprus-reunification-talks-collapse-u-n-chief-very-sorry-idUSKBN19S02I) on Twitter that the outcome "shows the impossibility of reaching a settlement within the parameters" established by the U.N. This suggested that Turkey might start looking for a solution outside the bi-zonal, bi-communal federation framework, which has been the template for more than four decades. Cavasoglu has since stated that future talks should focus "on specific issues," in contrast to the comprehensive settlement previously sought.

Since Crans-Montana, Anastasiades has also hinted that alternative approaches might be necessary. In October, he talked of a "loose federation"—a much more decentralized state than the one long envisaged.

The collapse of the talks also gave a boost to those Turks and Turkish Cypriots who have long argued that the solution is, in fact, already here: the de facto partition currently in place. If this were just recognized

internationally, they argue, both "states" would be able to normalize relations and move on.

As these voices have become more vocal, Akinci, who continues to be committed to the traditional solution, has seen his grip on the negotiation process weaken, while that of Cavasoglu and the more nationalist Turkish Cypriot "foreign minister," Kudret Ozersay, has strengthened. At the U.N. General Assembly last September, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Cavasoglu both spoke to Anastasiades directly while ignoring Akinci. In the past, it has been customary for Turkey, both at the U.N. and elsewhere, to leave all direct talks with the Greek Cypriot leadership to the Turkish Cypriot leadership.

There is a growing fear that natural gas discoveries, which were once expected to help facilitate an agreement, may instead be working in the opposite direction.

If the quantities of available gas turn out to be significant, some Greek Cypriot conservatives in the south believe the ROC should forget about settlement talks and instead focus on exploiting the reserves for itself. If this were to happen, the ROC's ties with fellow gas producers Israel and Egypt would become far more significant, as would its ties to international oil companies, particularly American ones. While Turkish destroyers might harass an Italian oil company's ship, harassing an Exxon-chartered vessel would be a provocation of another order. Exxon's strong partnership with the state-owned Qatar Petroleum might also make Ankara warier about mixing it up with Exxon's drill ships.

Glimmers of Hope

The U.N. is currently assessing prospects for restarting reunification talks, although it's unclear when and on what terms this might happen. Few expect the U.N. to "pull a rabbit out of the hat," as Cavasoglu has put it.

On the ground, however, there remain signs of support for reunification on both sides of the buffer zone—the most recent being the opening of the new border crossings in November.

As a result of the openings, for the first time since August 1974, Greek Cypriots who had lived in Famagusta could drive past their abandoned city, along a road many of them had used to flee during the hellish days of the 1974 Turkish invasion. They still cannot venture into the areas they once called home, but at least a small step has been taken.

Watching a Greek Cypriot tour bus pull up last October, Burcu Kasici, a Turkish Cypriot pharmacist, said those pulling for unity were stronger than those who wanted the standoff to continue.

"We want to be together," she said. "We are all Cypriots, after all. It's the politicians and the big powers that want to keep us apart."

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