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## Waiting for Miracles on Cyprus

HUGH POPE

As nearly two years of Cyprus negotiations head into what may be their final stages, a flicker of hope survives on the Mediterranean island. In April presidential elections, the pro-settlement leader of the Turkish Cypriots could manage to beat back an apparently overwhelming challenge from a nationalist hard-liner. Turkey and the Greek Cypriots could overcome decades of hostility and begin to talk. The Greek government, even with its back to the financial wall, might act courageously in the face of reluctant public opinion to bring all the parties together. World powers might cast aside their ennuï and throw their weight behind a settlement.

Indeed, when the latest round of talks started in 2008, there were plenty of reasons to argue that all sides at last saw that their best interest lay in reunifying Cyprus's 1.1 million people—about 80 percent Greek Cypriot and 20 percent Turkish Cypriot. Unfortunately, the legacies of distrust, inertia, and complacency have whittled back these hopes for a population that has been divided politically since bicomunal government broke down in 1963, and divided militarily since 1974, when a Greek-backed coup triggered a Turkish invasion that turned into occupation of the northern third of the island.

Even if no miracle occurs—even if the reunification Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat loses his job in April, and the latest of so many peace processes is left in tatters—almost nobody will want to end the talks. Preserving the idea of a negotiated settlement is critical both to the credibility of the Greek Cypriot political class and in Turkey's negotiations to join the European Union. As they have done since the 1950s, the two Cypriot communities will continue meeting,

discussing the theoretical dimensions of a federal settlement, and, if the past is any guide, assigning blame to the other side for lack of progress.

Some will say that de facto failure of the talks changes little, and that nothing is badly wrong with the status quo. Cypriots cross the front lines at will, and very few people have been hurt, let alone killed, in the past 35 years. United Nations officials already grumble that the UN should really pull out of one of its oldest missions. But with the Greek Cypriot and Greek governments picking up half the annual \$56 million bill, even the UN presence is unlikely to change.

Nevertheless, a clear-eyed look at the long-term situation suggests that this really is the last chance for a reunification on federal lines, and the lack of a settlement now will have consequences. This will be the fifth time that all sides have failed in the Sisyphean task of reaching agreement on the basis of the grand Cyprus compromise first announced in 1977—a “bicomunal, bizonal federation.” And if a deal cannot be struck by two Cypriot community leaders who are personal friends and clearly understand each other well, at a time when the Turkish and Greek governments are broadly supporting them, and while the international climate has been propitious, well then, when can it happen?

### GETTING TO “NO”

The history of the Cyprus problem has featured several major phases, and one of those phases is now nearing a conclusion. The first phase, as the end of British colonial rule approached in the 1950s, was characterized by growing intercommunal violence. The second phase ran from independence in 1960 until the republic broke down in 1963, as the Greek Cypriot side drove the Turkish Cypriots out of government amid more ethnic violence. In the third phase, between 1963 and 1974, the Greek Cypriots monopolized the

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HUGH POPE, *the Turkey/Cyprus project director for the International Crisis Group, is the author most recently of Dining with Al Qaeda: Three Decades Exploring the Many Worlds of the Middle East (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Press, 2010).*

internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus, and Turkish Cypriots were confined to ghettos or isolated villages.

The July 15, 1974, coup, organized by the junta in Athens with the aim of uniting the island with Greece, was reversed five days later by a Turkish invasion. This started a fourth phase, which has lasted to the present day, in which Turkish troops, defying international criticism, have occupied the north of the island, and the Turkish Cypriots at times have tried to win recognition for a self-standing state.

During this fourth phase, several rounds of UN-facilitated talks have failed due to nationalist grandstanding on both sides, most obviously but not only by hard-line Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash. As EU membership for Cyprus came closer in the early part of the past decade, intense UN-led negotiations over several years produced a plan named for the then-secretary general, Kofi Annan. The plan was strongly backed by the EU, the UN, and most of the rest of the international community.

In a December 2003 election the Turkish Cypriots, wanting an end to their uncertainty and to join the EU with the Greek Cypriots, rejected Denktash's policies. Turkey, itself seeking the right to start negotiating to join the EU, also switched to backing the Annan Plan, which called for withdrawing the bulk of its troops over time. The fourth phase should thus have ended in 2004 with a reunified Cyprus's entry into the EU.

But the Greek Cypriot leadership—the current president, Demetris Christofias, was then part of the ruling coalition under the late President Tassos Papadopoulos—turned against the Annan Plan. The principal Greek Cypriot objections were the following: UN arbitrators had favored Turkey; the proposed government looked too complicated and too burdened with ethnic balancing to function; the Turkish withdrawal, envisioned to take many years, was not quick enough; and the ambiguity of the “virgin birth” of a new United Cyprus Republic might give Turkish Cypriots the right to secede and claim recognition for an independent Turkish Cypriot state. In an April 2004 referendum, 76 percent of Greek Cypriots rejected the plan, while 65 percent of Turkish Cypriots approved it.

The EU, partly because it had mistakenly expected a Greek Cypriot “yes,” had previously promised

Greek Cypriots that they would enter the EU whatever the result of the referendum. The EU failed to reverse this decision after the referendum, partly for fear that Greece would veto the entire May 2004 enlargement that included nine other, mainly Eastern European, countries. On May 1, 2004, the EU accepted Cyprus as a member, even though the island remained divided in practice, its government solely in Greek Cypriot hands.

## LIMBO, AND A SURPRISE

After this serious error of judgment by the EU, the Cyprus problem entered an awkward period of limbo. The EU promised to reward the Turkish Cypriots for their attempt to reunify the island by reducing their isolation through the right to trade directly with its member states. But the Republic of Cyprus's first action as an EU member was to block this goodwill gesture. Turkey countered by renegeing on a 2005 pledge to open its seaports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic.

This led in December 2006 to a decision by the European Council, under pressure from the Republic of Cyprus, to suspend eight of the “chapters,” or negotiating areas, of Turkey's EU accession process. When in 2009 the EU declined to impose any additional measures against Turkey, Cyprus said it would formally block another six chapters on its own. This means that the Cyprus dispute has closed down half of Turkey's entire negotiating process with the EU.

In 2006, desultory talks had restarted between negotiators for Papadopoulos, who had opposed the Annan Plan, and Talat, who had supported it. The talks led nowhere, despite more than 50 meetings. When the Greek Cypriot presidential election came around in February 2008, Papadopoulos campaigned once again on no compromise with the Turkish Cypriots.

Here came a surprise: Papadopoulos lost in the first round of balloting, coming in third by a few thousand votes to two candidates, both of whom advocated compromise and who between them won two-thirds of Greek Cypriot votes. This outcome reflected the fact that substantial numbers of Greek Cypriots individually realize that their country is ultimately in a dead end without normalization with Turkey, even if they remain trapped by a collective fear natural to a community of about 750,000

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people confronting Turkey's 75 million. The victor in the second round was Christofias, the leader of the nominally communist party AKEL.

Christofias enjoyed a long-established dialogue with Talat, based on their left-wing parties' common ideological rejection of ethnic nationalism. In the spring of 2008, Christofias and Talat agreed to start a new round of UN-mediated reunification talks. Leading members of both communities joined 13 committees and working groups to discuss issues and come up with confidence-building measures. In June 2008, six technical agreements were announced on matters from ambulance crossings to road safety. In July, 16 more ideas for cooperation were added. On the basis of working papers from these groups, the two leaders settled down to full negotiations in September 2008.

## TALKING POINTS

Before most sessions, Christofias and Talat met privately for at least an hour and sometimes much longer. Inside the room, they apparently displayed empathy and mutual understanding. Over the course of 2009, Greek Cypriots gradually showed a willingness to accept advice and ideas from UN experts on difficult constitutional and property issues. As the time for Talat to face reelection approached, and after months in which Christofias had prioritized foreign travel over negotiations, the Greek Cypriots agreed to long-standing Turkish Cypriot requests for a more "intensive" process. This resulted in two three-day sessions in January 2010 and the promise of more talks in February.

So far the two men have met for more than 60 rounds of full negotiations under UN auspices. Their chief negotiators have held many other meetings, as have other experts. Because the Greek Cypriot side refused to take the Annan Plan as a starting point, the two sides spent initial months painstakingly constructing a new document, with different colors of text distinguishing matters agreed, potentially agreed, and not agreed.

Together the two sides produced some 30 "convergence papers," and UN officials in the room believe there are many areas in which the two sides are much closer than they admit in public. The main facilitator, and the UN secretary general's special adviser for Cyprus, Alexander Downer, termed the two leaders "very committed," though he would never say he was more than "cautiously optimistic" about the outcome.

The core technical difficulty of negotiations has always been how to construct a reunified federal

state on the hard-to-define principles of bicommunality and bizonality. Greek Cypriots want to keep as much power as possible within the federal government and ensure that the new state is a continuation of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkish Cypriots want to keep as much power as possible within the two "constituent states" and ensure that their entity is treated as an equal founder.

Another question is how bizonality can accord with fundamental EU freedoms regarding the movement of goods, capital, services, and persons. Greek Cypriots want full rights to live, vote, and buy property in the north, while Turkish Cypriots would prefer to minimize arrivals of Greek Cypriots, fearing their greater wealth would lead to extensive ownership of property. Yet Turkish Cypriots do want the right to work in the south and benefit from its better hospitals and services.

If and when an agreement is reached, it will be put to a popular referendum, which pollsters say would be a tough sell but certainly possible for Christofias and Talat to win. During most of the negotiation period, the two men have appeared to benefit from the population's passive support for the talks. In an April 2009 poll by the Center for European Policy Studies, majorities in both communities said that the other side should have rights to vote, find work, live, start a business, and worship in each other's zone; three-quarters majorities supported a bicomunal, bizonal, federal settlement or found it a tolerable compromise; and two-thirds majorities actively hoped that the negotiations succeeded in reaching a federal settlement, even if they were pessimistic that this would actually happen. On the Greek Cypriot side, pro-compromise Greek Cypriot parties did much better in European Parliament elections in June 2009 than five years earlier, while hard-line anti-compromise parties that campaigned on the Cyprus issue did less well.

The Turkish Cypriots, however, served notice of a new, more skeptical mood in April 2009 parliamentary elections, which brought back to power the National Unity Party (UBP). The UBP has run Turkish Cypriot affairs most of the time since 1975, when the party was founded by Denktash. Deteriorating economic conditions, rising unemployment, a higher cost of living, and a swelling public deficit played the biggest role in the defeat of Talat's Republican Turkish Party (CTP). But also contributing to the loss was disillusionment arising from a lack of progress in the reunification

talks and the EU's failure to keep its 2004 promise to ease Turkish Cypriot isolation. The UBP, known for its closeness to hard-line factions in Turkey, campaigned on demands for new guarantees from Turkey and a high degree of autonomy or independence for Turkish Cypriots in any settlement.

## LOSING STEAM

So what has so eroded the high hopes of 2008? First, Christofias and Talat have proved unable to rekindle the excitement of 2004, when vocal advocates of a settlement, along with vocal opponents, made themselves heard on both sides. Today, even angry denunciation of the talks is rare. Opinion leaders in both communities have at times seemed cynical about the process. Officials have done almost nothing to implement the 22 confidence-building steps agreed to in the summer of 2008—as one official put it, we “fight about how to do it, and then we're too lazy to do it.”

Moreover, negotiations on the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” have helped participants feel that some convergence has been achieved, but have not given them anything to show in public for their effort. The two leaders have never had a joint public strategy, nor have they jointly communicated their undoubted desire to build a brighter future for Cypriots. The negotiating process has never even acquired a name.

Prospects for a settlement were damaged in Greek Cypriot opinion because it took a year of bickering just to agree to open a new crossing point on a mountain road—signalling how loose is the leaders' grip on the negotiations. For Turkish Cypriots, one problem has been Christofias's frequent public expressions of doubt about the prospects for success, apparently to keep his hard-line coalition partners on his side and because he believes it strengthens his hand at the negotiating table.

Talat, meanwhile, has been undermined by his party's poor performance in government. Also, although he came to power campaigning for federal reunification, Talat lost moral authority by revealing different and sometimes contradictory feelings to different constituencies about the likely outcome of the talks. Polls show Turkish Cypriot opinion drifting away from support for a settlement and for reunification based on a federation.

Perhaps the most important hurdles facing the negotiators, however, are the deep distrust between Greek Cypriots and Turkey, and the failure until now of the countries that enjoy good relations with both of these parties—Greece and to an extent the United Kingdom—to find a way to bring the two sides together.

Greek Cypriots, Turks, and their respective countries have changed vastly since the 1960s, but lack of familiarity between them means that old hostile prejudices have gone unchallenged. In 2008, both Ankara and Nicosia had leaderships that publicly committed to finding a settlement. But ultimately the top leaders maintained overly ambitious expectations of what a settlement would look like, overestimated how much the EU could or would force the other side to compromise, and believed that the other side was not really aiming for a settlement. The mutual conviction that there was little prospect of success kept both sides stuck at the starting point in negotiations, maintaining positions that should have been only opening bids.

Much debate revolves around the Treaty of Guarantee, which Turkey invoked to invade in 1974. The treaty is one of three interlocking treaties signed by Turkey, Greece, and the United Kingdom in 1960 according to which they pledged to guarantee the

state of affairs on Cyprus. All parties will have to agree on any change to the treaty. But the debate has been more a proxy for mutual distrust than a real examination of the issues.

Greek Cypriots who really talked to Turks would probably find Ankara ready to be flexible as long as it could retain an ultimate right to defend Turkish Cypriots against armed attack. And Turks would probably find Greek Cypriots less implacably hostile to a deal if Ankara could only move on from refusing to negotiate with Greek Cypriots at all, even as it announces unclear “red lines” on matters it considers crucial to the negotiations.

## THE COSTS OF FAILURE

A flurry of Cyprus-related activities in January 2010—a three-hour meeting that left the Turkish and Greek foreign ministers with broad smiles; a Turkish offer to meet the Greek Cypriot compromise of a revolving presidency; a visit to the island by the UN secretary general—has raised hopes that a last-minute breakthrough may be possible.

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The problem, however, is that no one involved in the process feels that any deadline is approaching. Talat's chances of retaining his leadership position in the April 2010 election are, at this point, uncertain. If he loses, most Cypriots will feel no immediate change on a day-to-day basis. Negotiations will continue, because the price of being blamed for having sunk the process is higher than just going on. Shadow-fencing will continue over what the differences might be between a federation and a confederation.

This does not mean the situation will remain static.

The Turkish Cypriots, already in a weak position, will be the biggest losers. Among the 300,000 people in north Cyprus, they are probably already outnumbered compared to immigrants from Anatolia, and are steadily leaving. As Turkey cracks a whip over the wasteful finances of the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, and as the territory becomes ever more rapidly a cultural and economic extension of a relatively poorer Turkey, many Turkish Cypriots who have already obtained EU passports from the Republic of Cyprus will leave for richer places like Istanbul, London, and other EU states. Quite a few will move to the Greek Cypriot south.

Turkey will face international opprobrium for its military occupation of one-third of an EU state. It will be stuck with the \$700 million-a-year bill for financing the territory. And it will see its half-frozen EU negotiation process freeze up completely. This means Turkey will lose its main locomotive of domestic reform. As it drifts away from the EU, the positive trends of the past 10 years may weaken, making Turkish leaders less likely to rein in authoritarian tendencies. This would unnerve the foreign investors who have supported the prosperity of recent years, and diminish the charisma that has made the Turkish development model so appealing to Middle Eastern and other countries in the region.

Turkish politicians trumpet the line that the world "must not force us to choose between Europe and the Turkish Cypriots, because we'll always choose the Turkish Cypriots." In fact, if Turkey turns its back on the EU in the absence of a Cyprus settlement, this is the surest route to the slow extinction of the Turkish Cypriot community on the island.

For Greece, too, failure to settle Cyprus has costs that it can ill afford in a time of national financial difficulty. The political side of the

decade-long normalization process with Turkey is flagging. In private, officials in Ankara make clear that without a settlement on Cyprus there will be little chance of resolving Greco-Turkish differences in the Aegean Sea. And without that, there will be no end to the constant testing of each other's air and other defenses, a costly burden that has helped make Greece's ratio of defense spending to economic output one of the highest in the EU.

The Greek Cypriots have succeeded in creating a prosperous economy since the catastrophe of 1974, but they have reached the limits of what they can achieve. They risk turning into a ghetto on the easternmost tip of Europe. Hotels have been struggling for nearly a decade, with high airline fuel prices undermining competitiveness and the best coastlines overbuilt. In the absence of normalization with Turkey, the neighboring economic powerhouse, parents already are noticing that their brightest children are heading to Athens and other more globalized European cities.

## COME TOMORROW

Decades with no change in the status quo show that the Greek Cypriots are losing their bet that the world will one day enforce their legitimate rights without significant compromise on their part. Failure to reach a solution in 2010 will ensure that another generation will grow up with Turkish troops manning a front line that zigzags through the stone streets and palm trees of the Cypriot capital. Compensation to Greek Cypriots for the Turkish occupation of their properties will be left to the whim of international courts, and large swathes of territory that would have been returned in a peace deal will never be recovered.

For years, Greek Cypriot politicians and opinion leaders have bitterly protested that the Annan Plan that they rejected in 2004 should not be mentioned ever again because it represented an international plot to destroy their country. But in January 2010, President Christofias sent a letter to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in which he officially protested 10 instances in which, he said, a set of new Turkish proposals differed from the Annan Plan.

As time goes by, more and more people may come to regret the demise of this rigorously negotiated document, however difficult it might have been to implement. Saving today has always seemed more palatable to Cypriots than planning for tomorrow, but tomorrow always comes. ■