

WHY TURKISH CYPRIOTS DESERVE AN EQUAL AND INDEPENDENT STATE

Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney

TODAY, from the perspective of Turkish Cypriots, the old models for an agreement on the Cyprus issue have been exhausted. They thus believe that the time has come to adopt a new approach based on the current realities on the ground. Turkish Cypriots legitimately argue that the continued insistence on the “bi-zonal, bi-communal federation model” for the island of Cyprus, which has been the focus of negotiations for nearly 60 years, has yielded no results due to the unwillingness of the Greek Cypriot administration. In this regard, Turkish Cypriots believe that an agreement within the framework of good neighborly relations on the island can only be made between two existing states based

on equality and equal international status. Therefore, it is no surprise that former foreign minister of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu said on September 22nd, 2022, that the Turkish people demand the official recognition of their republic and the reaffirmation of their vested rights—namely sovereign equality and equal international status for the Turkish Cypriot state.

The Cyprus issue is a status issue. It stems from the reality that there are two peoples living on the island of Cyprus with different languages, religions, and cultures. Turkish Cypriots have had their state since 1983. Hence, the TRNC continues to function as an independent

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Turkish soldiers march during a military parade in North Nicosia on July 20th, 2023

Source: Guliver Image

state with its own democratically elected president, government and parliament, independent judiciary, and all other state institutions. The irony is that the Greek Cypriots use the name “The Republic of Cyprus” to refer to the whole island, a republic that they seized and continue to turn into a Greek Cypriot State. This is despite the fact that both peoples are sovereign equals. Therefore, any effort aiming to resolve this issue through the UN system must first consider the inconsistencies of this situation.

Unfortunately, even though the Turkish Cypriot people in the northern part of the island have displayed a construc-

tive attitude towards reaching an agreement for more than 60 years, they still suffer from the longstanding status quo that benefits the southern Cypriot administration. What is worse, due to the existing embargos imposed on the TRNC, the Turkish Cypriot people continue to live in unjust and inhumane isolation that affects all spheres of life, ranging from travel to representation in sports, trade, and cultural events.

THE ROOTS OF DIVISION

The Greek claims that the Cyprus problem began with the 1974 intervention of the Turkish troops and that the resolution hinges on their

withdrawal, is untrue. Contrary to this gross misrepresentation, the Cyprus question began in 1960. The subsequent landing of the Turkish troops was thus the consequence, and not the cause, of the problem. Therefore, this short paper aims to explain the historical progression of events and how these have led to the status quo, which effectively works against the needs of Turkish Cypriots.

There is a tendency in the global policy community to analyze the Cyprus issue by starting from the events of 1974. Moreover, there is a failure to consider the issues of the 1950s that set the stage and conditions for what culminated in 1974. This denial of pre-1974 issues has unfortunately contributed to serious legal and political complications that wrongly favor the Greek Cypriots, which understandably provides a continuous source of tension between the former partners on the island. Additionally, it allows for the justification and acceptance of the Greek Cypriot regime as the legitimate government of the entire Cypriot island. It further emboldens the refusal to recognize the right of the Turkish Cypriots to establish their governmental structure.

It is widely accepted that the Greek and Turkish Cypriots lived together peacefully under Ottoman rule. However, after the beginning of British rule in 1821, the Greek Cypriots started to pursue the objective of *enosis*, or unification with Greece. In this regard, they aimed to oust both the British rulers and the

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Turkish Cypriots from the island so that the annexation of Cyprus could be accomplished. With the formal annexation of the island by the UK in 1914, the tide of Greek nationalist ambitions in Cyprus reached a climax. In 1955, the Greek Cypriots launched a violent campaign, through the terrorist organization EOKA with the guidance of Archbishop Makarios, to annex Cyprus to Greece which resulted in the murder of both Turkish Cypriots and British officials who were also opposed to the realization of *enosis*. Turkish Cypriots as the co-inhabitants of the island refused to accept the annexation of Cyprus by Greece and relations between the two sides further deteriorated. By 1959, the living conditions for Turkish Cypriots had become unbearable due to continued assaults by Greek Cypriots.

Despite these displays of violence by ethnic Greeks—which continued throughout the 1950s—diplomatic

negotiations eventually resulted in a compromise between the leaders of the Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots, Türkiye, Greece, and the UK through the London and Zurich Agreements. Hence, the Republic of Cyprus was established in 1960 between Turkish and Greek Cypriots in line with international agreements, namely the Treaties of Establishment, Guarantee, and Alliance. With this agreement, Cyprus gained its independence and at the same time guarantor rights were given to Türkiye, Greece, and the UK. More importantly, the Republic of Cyprus was designed as a functional federation in 1960. According to this deal, the political

equality of Turkish and Greek Cypriots was recognized as the co-founding partners of the new Republic. According to the *sui generis* design of the new Cyprus Republic, neither of the parties had the right to rule the other or assume the right to govern the island as a whole on its own—that is, in the absence of the other. However, it soon became clear that the Greek Cypriots had not given up their ambitions of realizing *enosis* and the 1960 partnership-based Republic of Cyprus lasted for only three

years. This failure of the partnership was due to the unilateral destruction of the Cyprus's constitutional order in 1960 by the Greek Cypriots, which was accomplished by force. Following this,

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Turkish Cypriots lived under siege for nearly a decade in the areas where they had been forced to flee from their homes. As many as 103 Turkish villages were destroyed before the eyes of the international community and the UN peacekeepers, who had maintained presence on the green line set-up in 1963. Following the fall of the Republic of Cyprus due to the continuous uncooperative and aggressive assaults of the Greek Cypriots, the two peoples established their

separate administrations on the island, which continues to this day. However, the Greek Cypriots seized the title of the Republic of Cyprus in 1963 and continue to claim it illegitimately. Effectively, the Republic of Cyprus, which was established in 1960 as a bi-national functional federation, was converted into a purely Greek Cypriot state.

Crucially, the massacres of civilians in 1963, 1964, 1967, and 1974 are essential to understanding the Turkish

Cypriot position in negotiations. More importantly, the practical consequences of the massacres committed by Greeks in 1963 and 1964 gave way to the emergence of parallel administrative, judicial, and legislative organs for each of the two peoples on the island. Unfortunately, in the face of continued attacks in 1963 and 1964, Turkish Cypriots became obligated to withdraw into enclaves. Hence, at the end of these Greek Cypriot attacks, Turkish Cypriots became refugees on their own land. Today, the bodies of 300 Turkish Cypriots are still missing from the massacres of 1963. It was therefore in 1964, and not in 1974, that Cyprus was already divided by the green line drawn and imposed by the British Army, supposedly to protect the Turkish Cypriots from further massacres.

Eventually, on July 15th, 1974, the Greek junta in Athens staged a *coup d'état* in Cyprus in collaboration with the Greek Cypriot terrorist organization EOKA—a tragic event that not only violated the independence and sovereignty of the Republic but also opened the possibility for continued massacre of Turkish Cypriots. Consequently, to prevent the massacre of Turkish Cypriots, Türkiye intervened in Cyprus militarily

on July 20th, 1974, acting under Article IV of the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee.

THE CYPRUS QUESTION AND NEGOTIATIONS

A great number of negotiations have been held between Turkish and Greek Cypriots under the UN auspices since 1968. The details of inter-communal talks held between 1968 and 1974, then again between 1975 and 1979, 1980-1992, and 1999-2004 are recorded in the annals of the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. In 1983, Turkish Cypriots declared their own Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus but also continued their search for a path to reconciliation. During the UN-led negotiations, several additional parameters came into being. These included bi-zonality, political equality, the continuation of the Treaties of Guarantee of Alliance, resolution of property issues on the basis of global exchange and/or compensation, and restrictions on the freedoms (of movement, settlement, and property).

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other were the 2017 Crans-Montana negotiations. The 2004 Annan Plan is considered one of the most comprehensive peace plans in the history of the UN. Furthermore, this plan was accepted in a referendum by 65 percent of the Turkish Cypriot votes but rejected by 76 percent of the Greek Cypriot votes. The Annan plan was based on the Foundation Agreement, which envisaged the establishment of a united Cyprus, based on a new bi-zonal partnership, with a federal government and two constituent states: namely the Greek and the Turkish Cypriot state. Under the UN plan, it was stipulated that the constituent states would be of equal status, with each of them exercising its authority within its territorial boundaries. Additionally, the identity, territorial integrity, security, and constitutional order of the constituent states shall be safeguarded and respected by all.

After the Greek Cypriots rejected the plan, the EU made another terrible mistake. By accepting the unilateral application of the Greek Cypriot government for membership in the bloc, the EU surely removed any residual motivation of the Greeks to share governance with the Turkish Cypriots.

Based on the 1959-1960 Treaties on Cyprus, the Greek Cypriot side had no authority to negotiate on behalf of the entire island, making this unilateral EU membership accession a violation of international law. Moreover, the said Treaties also prohibit Cyprus from joining any international organization of

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which both Türkiye and Greece are not members. Another unjustifiable situation is that the European Council's decision of 2004 that 'promised to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots without conditions' has not yet been implemented.

Over the period between 2008 and 2017, the UN conducted numerous negotiations, exploring possibilities for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus issue. However, another historic opportunity was lost due to the disinterest of the Greek Cypriots. Important progress was achieved during the second and final session of the Crans-Montana negotiations in 2017, due to the constructive attitude of both Turkish Cypriots and Türkiye. However, at the very last moment, it was Nicos Anastasiades, the then President of the Republic of Cyprus, who left the table and showed no goodwill, thereby bringing about the collapse of negotiations. The failure to reach a settlement within

the framework of the Crans-Montana negotiations after the results of the Annan plan referendum proved that Greek Cypriots—despite their leaders’ rhetoric that they want Cyprus to be governed by a federation between Turkish and Greek Cypriots—are neither willing to share power with the Turkish Cypriots nor to acknowledge their political equality.

As long as the status quo on the island continues, it benefits the Greek while punishing the Turkish Cypriots. Therefore, this cannot in any way be considered just or tolerable. The unjust and inhumane isolation has continued for too long and must be stopped. Ironically, the Turkish side that has always worked towards a settlement on the island is being punished. Those who have repeatedly blocked a settlement on the island are being rewarded.

Moreover, one should not make the mistake of comparing the case of Russia’s actions in the Ukraine war with Türkiye’s legitimate intervention in 1974. Ankara was well within its legal rights when it intervened in Cyprus as a guarantor state so that it could prevent the slaughter of Turkish Cypriots by enforcing the security of the already

established green line. The Greek junta had assembled in great numbers on the island to annihilate the Turkish Cypriots with the help of EOKA, all in an attempt to accomplish its *enosis* objective. It was the intervention of Türkiye that thwarted those plans.

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IS THERE HOPE FOR COOPERATION?

To date, the talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots have not resulted in a positive outcome for the unification of the island in the format of a federation. This is largely due to the rejection by the Greek Cypriots. After living through such hardship and suffering

since the 1950s, Turkish Cypriots have decided to go along a different path and now demand their own independent state to be recognized. This political path was chosen at the 2020 democratic presidential elections. After his election, TRNC President Ersin Tatar said that “since previous attempts to solve the Cyprus issue have failed and Turkish Cypriots have been running their own state since 1960, Turkish Cypriots now deserve their own state to be recognized.” He further underlined that “for a lasting solution to the Cyprus question there should be two states on the island, which would recognize each other on

the basis of sovereign equality.” Ankara, of course, respects and supports the Turkish Cypriots’ new policy that is based on two equal, sovereign states on the island.

In the early 2000s, the finding of gas reserves around the island raised expectations that this development could be a facilitator in finding a solution to the Cyprus issue. However, due to the Greek Cypriots’ unilateral declaration of the so-called licensing blocks for hydrocarbon-related activities in the Eastern Mediterranean—which disregards the legitimate rights of Turkish Cypriots—there has yet been no positive outcome. As the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs underlined: “The Greek Cypriot Administration does not represent in law either the Turkish Cypriots or Cyprus as a whole [...] Hence, they are not entitled to negotiate or conclude international agreements, nor to adapt laws, regarding the exploitation of natural gas or other natural resources on behalf of the entire island...”

The TRNC and Türkiye protested to the international community and the Greek Cypriots regarding the latter’s illegal gas exploration activities. Yet, the Greek Cypriot administration continued with both licensing acts

and provocative offshore activities, even during the 2008-2017 negotiation process. Furthermore, following the conclusion of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean—with the south claiming to be the sole government on the island—the TRNC government, together with Ankara, decided to respond. As a countermeasure, Ankara and the TRNC signed a continental shelf delimitation agreement in 2011. With this agreement, the TRNC issued licenses for the exploration and exploitation of gas and oil around the island to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation. This issue of denial of inalienable rights of access to natural resources on the island to the Turkish Cypriots continues to be disregarded by the Greek Cypriot administration.

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Perhaps, in the changed and rather normalized conditions in the MENA region—where countries like Israel and Lebanon ended their maritime border dispute by reaching a gas agreement—this could motivate the Southern Cyprus administration to start cooperating with the TRNC in gas exploration activities on an equal footing. In the recent past, TRNC presidents have suggested cooperation schemes regarding gas exploration, but they were rejected by the South.

For instance, in June 2019, TRNC President Mustafa Akıncı presented a proposal in the United Nations, calling for the joint use of Cypriot resources and cooperation between the two sides in the search for offshore gas. Türkiye welcomed and fully supported the proposal, saying it envisages cooperation (including revenue sharing) that would enable both sides to benefit from hydrocarbon resources simultaneously. Ankara, following the TRNC’s proposal has called on the UN, the EU, and the guarantor states not to miss this opportunity that would encourage both the exploitation of Cyprus’s hydrocarbon resources and cooperation between the North and South. However, Greek Cypriots once again rejected the proposal, making this another missed opportunity. Today, with the recent accomplishment of Lebanon and Israel reaching a maritime border agreement—two states that also do not recognize each other—a new hope is rising on the horizon and should not be missed by the Southern Cypriots. Much good can come out of embracing cooperation with the TRNC in the field of hydrocarbon resources.

EQUAL SOVEREIGN STATES

As this essay attempts to demonstrate, there are more than a few tangible reasons why the prospects for reunification of Cyprus diminished dramatically over recent years. In fact, after five decades of unsuccessful negotiations, the 2017 Crans-Montana Summit was seen as the last and best hope for realizing the reunification of Cyprus. However, due to the last-minute departure of the Southern Cyprus administration from the negotiating table, these hopes were dashed. Therefore, prospects for renewed talks under the bizonal, bi-communal federation have diminished. The people of the TRNC are tired of negotiations going nowhere and are no longer interested in them. According to Turkish Cypriots, the path toward a renewed settlement and lasting solution for the Cyprus question now requires that there be two states on the island that would recognize each other based on sovereign equality. Consequently, after all this time, Turkish Cypriots deserve their TRNC to be recognized as one of the two equal, sovereign states on the island. ●

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