

## The Cyprus Issue: What is Next?

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Map Source: BBC



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### *Executive Summary*

For over fifty years, the Cyprus Problem has been a byword for an intractable ethnic conflict. Despite many efforts to broker an agreement, the UN has been unable to resolve the dispute between the island's Greek and Turkish communities.

In the early hours of Friday, 7 July, UN sponsored talks aimed at the reunification of Cyprus broke up without agreement. After ten days of discussions in the Swiss mountain resort of Crans Montana, the UN Secretary-General was forced to conclude that no settlement was possible. It was a bitter blow for the many observers who felt that this latest negotiation process between the Cypriot leaders had been the best chance to resolve the long-standing division of the island.

The collapse of the most recent settlement initiative has raised serious questions about the future of efforts to reach a solution. With the resumption of talks unlikely in the foreseeable future, and the possibility of tension over energy resources in the region, attention is turning to longer term ways to resolve the Cyprus Problem.

Efforts to reunite the island as a federation look increasingly untenable. However, the international community will not accept two separate states on the island. Meanwhile, the threat of Turkish annexation would have disastrous consequences for both communities. It may be time to take a radically different approach. Perhaps a more organic approach towards a settlement is now needed.

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## Background

The island of Cyprus first came to international attention in 1955, when the island's Greek community, which represented roughly 80 per cent of the population, launched an uprising against British colonial rule and sought to unite the island with Greece (enosis). This was strongly opposed by the smaller Turkish Cypriot community, which favoured dividing the island between Greece and Turkey (taksim). As Cyprus teetered on the brink of civil war, Athens and Ankara decided that the island should become an independent state. Britain agreed in return for two sovereign military bases. A complex power sharing system was devised, underpinned by constitutional guarantee signed by Britain, Greece and Turkey.

In August 1960, the Republic of Cyprus came into being. Despite hopes that the new state could work, tensions soon emerged between the two communities. In December 1963, fighting broke out. Following an emergency peacekeeping operation by Britain, the UN Security Council authorized the creation of the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and the establishment of a UN peacemaking initiative (UNSCR 186). However, ten years later, in July 1974, tensions flared up again when the military junta in Greece ordered the overthrow of the island's leader, Archbishop Makarios. Fearing that this was a prelude for enosis, Turkey invaded Cyprus and proceeded to occupy the northern third of the island.

In 1977, the leaders of the two communities agreed that any future reunification would be based on a bizonal, bicomunal federation. However, in 1983 the Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared independence. Although this new state – the so-called 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC) – was recognized by Turkey, it was condemned by the UN Security Council, which called on UN members not to recognize any other state on the island apart from the Republic of Cyprus (UNSCR 541). Despite this, talks soon resumed under UN auspices. Unfortunately, little progress was made throughout the rest of the 1980s, or during the 1990s – largely due to the intransigence of the Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktaş.

The big change came in the early 2000s, when Cyprus was accepted for membership of the European Union. Ankara realized that if Cyprus joined the EU, Nicosia would be able to block its Turkey's membership process. This led to a new UN initiative and a comprehensive proposal for the reunification of the island – the Annan Plan. The proposal was rejected by the Greek Cypriot leader, Tassos Papadopoulos, who believed that the island's imminent EU accession would put it in a stronger position, and lead to a more favourable deal at a later stage. Although two thirds of Turkish Cypriots accepted the Annan Plan in a referendum, three quarters of Greek Cypriots rejected it. A week later, on 1 May 2004, a divided Cyprus joined the EU.

In the years that followed, several efforts were made to restart discussions between the two sides. However, for a variety of reasons, these went nowhere. In 2013, the Greek Cypriots elected a new leader, Nicos Anastasiades. This was widely regarded as a positive development as he had openly campaigned in favour of the Annan Plan. In 2015, the Turkish Cypriots also elected a moderate, pro-solution leader, Mustafa Akinci. Under Anastasiades and Akinci, the UN talks began to make significant progress. Broad agreement was made across many areas, including the key issues of governance, territory and property. In December 2016, the UN announced that a conference would be called to discuss the security aspects of a settlement. The first meeting took place in Geneva, in January 2017. This broke up on the first day. Six months later, the conference was reconvened, this time in Crans Montana. Despite ten days of intense discussions, no agreement was reached and the Conference on Cyprus was officially closed by the UN Secretary-General.

## New Talks on Unification?

The failure of the talks has raised questions about next steps. Despite speculation in certain quarters that the UN process could be revived relatively soon, this appears to be unlikely. This is for two reasons; first, the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor, Espen Barth Eide, has stepped down from his role to return to politics in his native Norway. The first order of the day, therefore, will be to appoint a new special advisor to take the reins. At present, there is little indication that the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, is in any hurry to do this. It is likely that he will want to reflect on what has happened. The UN has also made it clear that it does not want to engage in another process unless and until it can be sure that this is something the Cypriots want. But even if a new special advisor was to be appointed, the appointee would have to become acquainted with the Cyprus issue. This is likely to take several months.

Secondly, presidential elections will be held in the Republic of Cyprus next February. Although Nicos Anastasiades, the incumbent, has yet to declare whether he will stand again, many believe that it is inevitable. Facing a strong challenge from a hardline nationalist candidate, Anastasiades will not want to have to manage talks while on the campaign trail. But even if he wins again, the possibility of talks seems remote. The good relationship he once enjoyed with the Turkish Cypriot leader, Mustafa Akinci, has now soured. Akinci would also find himself under pressure from his own hard liners if he was seen to jump back into talks with the Greek Cypriots after all that has happened.

Under usual circumstances, this would not necessarily be a problem. After all, the Cyprus Problem has dragged on for decades. However, the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean are changing. The discovery of major deposits of natural gas in the region has opened the possibility that Cyprus may also be sitting on considerable energy wealth. This has exacerbated tensions between the two communities, and between the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey. Despite having unilaterally seceded from the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriots insist that any revenues must be equitably shared. Meanwhile, Turkey refuses to recognize the various agreements Cyprus has concluded with its neighbors concerning the delimitation of its exclusive economic zone. While Ankara may allow exploration activities to continue, it has repeatedly suggested that it would thwart attempts to exploit any gas reserves that may be found. All this has the potential to cause a major crisis in the region.

## Four Options

The question facing policy makers now is how best to handle the Cyprus problem. Four broad options exist. The first would be to continue with the UN negotiation process aimed at creating a bizonal, bicommunal state. However, after decades of discussions, many observers are now asking whether pursuing yet another attempt at reunification is worth the considerable time and effort required. While Turkish Cypriots may reluctantly support reunification, they would really prefer their own state. Likewise, polls have consistently shown that the preferred outcome for Greek Cypriots is a unitary state, in which Turkish Cypriots would have minority right. More to the point, many Greek Cypriots readily admit that they do not favour a federation that gives Turkish Cypriots powers that greatly exceed their numbers.

On top of this, there are also fears that a settlement that gives the Turkish Cypriots excessive control would be a recipe for political deadlock. Notwithstanding the huge price that Greek Cypriots have paid in terms of the loss of property and territory following the Turkish invasion, many accept that it has given them a Greek Cypriot controlled state. They are masters of their own house, even if a large part of it is under occupation. They worry about reunification. Under these conditions, any attempt to reach a settlement is going to have to persuade people to take a gamble. Should they give up the relative stability of the current situation to re-enter a partnership arrangement with the Turkish Cypriots? And what would happen if things fail again? Both are important questions. Without an extremely convincing answer, evidence suggests that it would be very hard to get a bizonal, bicommunal settlement past a popular vote. Unless a Greek Cypriot leader can be sure of securing victory, it is simply too dangerous to put any settlement plan to a referendum. A second no vote would inevitably have disastrous consequences.

In the absence of an agreement to reunite, some have suggested that the Turkish Cypriots should redouble their efforts to gain international recognition. This is unlikely to succeed. While there may be sympathy for their plight, the fact nevertheless remains that they unilaterally declared independence, and that this was specifically condemned by the United Nations Security Council. Despite the passage of time, few states want to be seen to condone unauthorized acts of secession. But even if a country was willing to argue that an exception should now be made for the Turkish Cypriots, it would almost certainly run into hard political and economic consequences. Cyprus entered the EU as a single territory. Recognizing the TRNC would almost certainly force a tough response from the European Union, including sanctions or cutting financial support. Few countries would be able to weather this.

A third option that has been subject to increasing discussion in recent years is the possibility that Turkey annexes Northern Cyprus. Admittedly, it would be a dramatic step. However, there are those in Ankara who will see it as the only way to handle Cyprus now that the hopes for a federal settlement appear to be over and the possibility of securing widespread international recognition for the TRNC is unlikely. Of course, annexation would have huge consequences. The European Union would be forced to respond. It could not let a land grab against one of its members go unanswered. Such a move would kill off any hopes that Turkey may have of joining the European Union. But few now believe that this is a realistic prospect anyway. Meanwhile, Turkey would no doubt feel that it could weather any other punishments it would have to suffer in the short term. Ankara may calculate that the EU needs Turkish support on a range of issues, not least of all tackling migration. Also, no one appears to want to see a firm and final rift with Turkey. With time, attitudes will soften. For Cyprus and the Cypriots, the effects of annexation will be nothing short of catastrophic. It will mean the creation of permanent hard border between the north and the south. Greek Cypriots will suddenly be faced with a militarized boundary with an increasingly unstable Turkey. The Turkish Cypriots will suffer too. Annexation will rob them of their last shreds of autonomy. They will be a province of a Turkey that has, under the AKP, become ever more alien. It is little wonder that many Turkish Cypriots would rather leave the island than accept the extension of direct Turkish rule over their lives.

Given that the three most obvious options each pose real problems, some suggest that there may yet be another route. Rather than pursue a federal settlement through a formal UN process, maybe it is time to consider a more organic and piecemeal approach. This could be done in a variety of ways. In some instances, unilateral steps could be taken to resolve some outstanding issues. This could include steps by the Turkish Cypriots to hand back some territory. In return, the Turkish Cypriots could be allowed to participate in certain sporting, educational and cultural activities on the international stage. It could also allow more direct trade between the Turkish Cypriots and the EU. Meanwhile, the two communities could build cooperation in various areas of joint concern. There could also be some sort of agreement to share revenues from natural gas. All this could build trust between the two communities and provide tangible examples of positive engagement between the communities. This may persuade people that reunification could work.

But for all this to happen, the Greek Cypriots would have to relax their uncompromising approach towards their own, and the international community's interaction, with the Turkish Cypriots. While many Greek Cypriots will strongly oppose this, believing that it amounts to recognition, such concerns could be allayed by an international commitment to continue to work towards eventual reunification. This could also be coupled with statements to the effect that while the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots should be eased, there is no question of recognizing the TRNC. (Of course, the two communities may at some point agree on a formal separation, or to pursue a confederal settlement as an alternative to federation. If that is their choice, then so be it.) In the meantime, the costs of perpetuating the current situation should be seriously considered by all concerned. Maintaining the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots will only hasten their departure from the island. This will not only make reunification even more difficult, it will also make the nightmare option of annexation ever more likely.