

The US and a Cyprus Settlement

by Andy Manatos

The polarized handling of the Cyprus issue in America is diminishing. Both lobbies, but particularly those most concerned about Turkey's interests, are realizing that attempts to strong-arm a Cyprus settlement haven't worked.

This can be seen in the urging of the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Cyprus by the US Representative who created the Congressional Turkey Caucus and who is also the Chair of the European Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Robert Wexler. It can as well be seen in the Turkish receptivity of US Vice President Joe Biden, who as a senator publically told a Turkish Prime Minister that unless you get your troops off of Cyprus "I will make your relationship with the United States as difficult as possible".

Even the American citizen groups are seeing the issue from a different perspective. Greek-Americans say, "If I were a Turkish-American my recommendations would be exactly the same. The occupation of Cyprus injures Turkey much more than it does Greece and nearly as much as it does Greek Cypriots."

In 2004, the last year Turkey was approaching a crucial EU decision point somewhat similar to this year's, American preparation was very different. After leaving office a pertinent Bush Administration official said that the Annan referendum was intended by the administration to have two possible outcomes. Either it would be adopted, and Turkey would no longer be occupying an EU country or the Greek Cypriots would vote against it, allowing the US to argue that Turkey wanted to solve Cyprus but Greek Cypriots voted against it. In either case Turkey's accession prospects would improve.

The great majority of the US Senators on the European Subcommittee opposed the provisions of that Annan Plan. Even a majority of the Republicans on that Subcommittee, normally heavily tilting toward Turkey's strategic importance, said in a letter to President Bush that the Annan Plan provisions were "unacceptable to western democracies". The Chair of the European Subcommittee was then Senator and now President Barack Obama, and the Senator who chaired that full Foreign Relations Committee was then Senator and now Vice President Joe Biden.

The Foreign Service officer in the State Department who was least trusted in 2004 by the Greek Cypriots' advocates in America, Assistant Secretary for Europe Daniel Fried, is today one of our government's most balanced people. A few weeks ago some in the State Department tried to orchestrate a step toward de facto American recognition of the occupied area of Cyprus with a meeting between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Talat prior to her meeting with any official of the Republic of Cyprus. Fried strongly opposed such treatment of the government of Cyprus. Secretary Clinton agreed with that position and insisted on meeting with Talat only after a full bilateral meeting with the Cypriot Foreign Minister.

America's more balanced approach could be seen in the conduct of President Barack Obama and Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton while visiting Turkey on separate trips. In both cases they threw open their arms to Turkish officials with praise and acceptance. But in both cases they helped Turkey understand that its best interests lie in ending the "military occupation of Cyprus", as Obama labeled it while in the Senate. It was the first time that a President of the United States publically declared in Turkey his desire to see a "bizonal, bicomunal federation."

Some signs from within Turkey are encouraging. US Senators visiting Turkey report significant Turkish citizens, particularly younger citizens, who are openly critical of the cost required to maintain more Turkish troops in Cyprus than America has in Afghanistan. There are reports from Turkey that the Cyprus issue does not carry the political impact that it did when Rauf Denktash spent time in Turkey advocating it. There are some indications that Turkey may have a looser grip on Turkish Cypriot negotiations this time. And most importantly, a majority of Turks still want EU membership, the path to which must pass through Nicosia.

Also encouraging are recent surveys on Cyprus regarding the security issue. Healthy majorities of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots find tolerable the requirement of UN Security Council permission before either Turkey or Greece could militarily intervene on Cyprus and for the creation of a unified bicomunal security force. Such attitudes are consistent with Cyprus' uniquely nonviolent bicomunal history. American policymakers have only recently realized Cyprus's history, that the two communities coexisted without violence for over 95 per cent of their over 400 year history together, that they seek each other's neighborhoods and social clubs as emigrants to Great Britain, Australia and elsewhere and that over 14 million Green Line crossings have occurred in Cyprus without major incident.

However, the bottom line for America is whether a new settlement proposal will secure a majority from both sides. The proposal must appeal to 26 per cent more Greek Cypriots than did the Annan Plan without evoking a "no" vote from 15 per cent more of the Turkish Cypriots. Only time will tell.

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