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THE CYPRUS PROBLEM: TIME TO THINK AGAIN*

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It is indeed a great pleasure and honor to share my thoughts with you today. Allow me a personal moment before I get to the subject of my presentation. My involvement with the Cyprus problem from 1984 to 1998, and in particular my five years in Cyprus, remains a highlight of my life and of my thirty five year career with the United Nations. The assignment was important, challenging, inspiring, as well as at times frustrating and disappointing. The icing on the cake was getting to know the island, its rich history, and especially its people, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots both. This has left me with warm recollections which I will always treasure.

It is my intention to share with you my thoughts on the current situation and how we got here. During the sixty years of the Cyprus question there have been numerous efforts to resolve the problem, unfortunately all with the results that we know. There have been only two relatively short periods when the leaders of both sides were in favor of a settlement, but even then no progress was made. There is a message in there somewhere.

Over the years the United Nations has proposed various ways to make progress toward an overall settlement. I will highlight the five principal efforts.

Between 1990 and 1992 detailed elements of a settlement of the Cyprus problem took shape in the form of an overall framework known as the Set of Ideas. What emerged was a relatively short but precise document which was unanimously endorsed by the Security Council as the basis for reaching a comprehensive agreement. It looked as if it would be possible for the Secretary-General to convene a high level conference attended by the two communities, Greece, and Turkey, to ratify an overall agreement. But that was not to be. Despite repeated efforts, the two sides were unable to resolve their differences.

Following the failure to reach agreement on the Set of ideas, the effort shifted in 93-94, to confidence building measures. These are the most ambitious CBMs that have ever been attempted and would have dramatically changed the situation.

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The proposals which were developed in cooperation with the International Civil Aviation Organization envisioned the reopening of Nicosia Airport for the benefit of both communities. It would have provided the Turkish Cypriot community direct links to economies worldwide, enabled the direct flow of tourists to northern Cyprus, and allowed Turkish Cypriots to fly directly to any destination. The second element of the CBMs would have enabled Greek Cypriots to return to their properties in Varosha. In addition, Varosha would have become a special area for bi-communal contact and commerce. Both Nicosia Airport and Varosha were to be placed under United Nations administration. Regrettably, this ambitious proposal which contained significant advantages for both communities did not succeed due to issues raised in particular by the Turkish Cypriot side concerning the access of Greek Cypriots to Varosha.

In October 1994, I hosted five informal dinners with President Clerides and Mr. Denktash in an attempt to move forward on an overall settlement and to explore possible progress on the CBMs. Mr Denktash wanted to focus on the CBMs while President Clerides emphasized the issue of Cyprus' membership in the EU. At that time Cyprus was uncertain how the EU would react to its initiative to become an EU member if the Cyprus problem remained unresolved. During these dinners President Clerides on numerous occasions stated that if Mr. Denktash expressed his support for Cyprus' membership in the EU, President Clerides would be forthcoming on matters related to an overall settlement. Unfortunately, Mr. Denktash did not respond positively and the Turkish Cypriots lost a major bargaining chip. Cyprus became an EU member but the Turkish Cypriots did not derive any benefits.

In the late 1990s the Secretary-General proposed that the two sides negotiate a comprehensive agreement that would cover in full detail all aspects of a settlement. The Annan Plan, prepared between 1999 and 2004, encompasses some 220 pages with 9000 pages of annexes. Over these five years numerous negotiations took place between the two sides in Cyprus, as well as with Greece and Turkey. It was the hope of the Secretary-General that the two sides would be able to reach an agreement by themselves. As differences persisted, it was envisaged that the Secretary-General would resolve the differences.

The election of Mr. Papadopoulos as President of Cyprus in January 2003 over President Glafkos Clerides, who advocated acceptance of the Annan Plan, was a clear sign that the Annan Plan was in deep trouble. Mr. Papadopoulos, who had been President for over one year prior to the referendum, strongly campaigned for a "no" vote. In this negative position he was joined by AKEL, while President Clerides and DISY called for a "yes" vote. The government of Greece took a neutral position while PASOK, the Greek opposition party, urged a "yes" vote. Three quarters of the Greek Cypriots rejected the Annan Plan. On the Turkish Cypriot side, even though Mr. Denktash urged a "no" vote, the fact that Turkey and Mr. Talat came out in favor significantly influenced the Turkish Cypriot voters who voted "yes" by a two thirds majority. In his report to the Security Council, the Secretary-General considered the outcome of the referendum a major setback in the search for a settlement of the Cyprus problem.

As this encyclopedic draft agreement was made public less than one month before the referendum, it is fair to assume that very few Cypriots had read the draft or were familiar with its content. They based their decision on the position of their political leaders — not a good way to proceed on such a momentous decision. The overwhelming “no” vote by the Greek Cypriot side also suggested that the Greek were not that dissatisfied with the existing situation. They knew that in either case Cyprus would become a member of the EU. The Turkish Cypriots on the other hand were attracted by the prospects of ending their isolation and becoming a member of the EU.

With the election of Mr. Talat in 2005 as the President in northern Cyprus and the election of Mr. Christofias in 2008 as the President of Cyprus, the process entered a period of optimism. This was the first time since the onset of the Cyprus problem that both communities were led by leaders who favored a solution based on a bi-communal and bi-zonal federation with political equality. Messrs. Christofias and Talat met many times over the two year period when both were in power, but the same old problems soon reappeared, and no significant progress was made.

In 2015 there was another period of optimism when Mr. Mustafa Akinci was elected President of northern Cyprus and Mr. Anastasiades had been President of Cyprus since 2013. Here again, while the prospects began with great expectation, the outcome was the same. The likelihood of progress soon dissipated and the process was allowed to fail at Crans-Montana in June 2017. The three remaining years of Mr. Akinci’s term were allowed to pass with no major effort to make progress. For the second time, advantage was not taken of the presence of a Turkish Cypriot leader who favored a settlement. In October 2020, Mr. Akinci lost his reelection and was succeeded by Mr. Ersin Tatar, a proponent of a two-state solution. This is where matters stand.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that major opportunities to reach an agreement were missed when Mr. Talat and Mr. Akinci were in power in northern Cyprus. These were the times for a determined effort with give and take to reach an agreement.

The prospects of making progress on an overall settlement in the near future are not good. An alternative approach should be adopted as inaction is likely to lead to a further deterioration of the situation. The Greek Cypriot side is rightly concerned about the overall situation in northern Cyprus. The socio-economic situation in the North is not good. There has been an exodus of Turkish Cypriots. The preservation of the integrity of the Turkish Cypriot community should be an overriding objective. It is in the interest of Greek Cypriots to assist the Turkish Cypriot community to strengthen the viability of its community. This can be done in a manner that does not affect the existing legality. Greek Cypriots should strengthen their informal relations with the Turkish Cypriots both economically and socially. Efforts should focus on ways that will arrest the hemorrhaging in the North by promoting closer ties that promote social and economic contacts between the two sides and by agreeing that the EU assist the Turkish Cypriots as had been envisaged after the 2004 referendum.

In considering how to proceed, one must remember that the two communities have lived apart since 1974 and to a large extent since 1963. For sixty years they have governed themselves, and have had little contact with each other even after the traffic across the green line was reopened in 2003. Both sides have grown accustomed to living by themselves. I recall during my stay in Cyprus, a senior Greek Cypriot official reminded me that the current situation was the very first time in their entire history that Greek Cypriots had lived by themselves and had governed themselves. This situation of course also applies to the Turkish Cypriots. Any arrangement must take this into account. Any effort that is not guided by President Makarios' admonition to strive for what is possible rather than what is desirable is bound to fail. President Vassiliou wisely echoed these thoughts in 2018 when he said "Under no circumstances can you rely on the dreams of what is desirable; it has to be the reality of what is feasible." He reminds us that the desirable may remain the same, but what is feasible is likely to change.