

THE LAUNCH OF NEW INTERCOMMUNAL TALKS: A REALITY CHECK

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It is understandable that any new initiative to settle the long-standing Cyprus dispute will arouse expectations and sanguinity in various quarters on the island and beyond. There appear to be numerous promising indicators. After months of deliberations, the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders have agreed on a joint communique that has defined the parameters of a settlement. For the first time senior Greek Cypriot officials have visited Ankara for direct exchanges, while their Turkish Cypriot counterparts met high officials in Athens.

One could cite several other encouraging signs as well, including Washington's renewed interest in the new talks, presumably to help facilitate the export of newly-discovered Cypriot and Israeli gas to Europe via Turkey. But one should not make too much of Washington's or other the external actors' capacity to facilitate a settlement, with Turkey's exception. Ankara has ample clout over Turkish Cypriots and will be required to make such important concessions as withdrawing its large contingent of troops stationed on the island as part of a settlement. Its active support of the negotiations by the Cypriot parties is thus essential to the prospects of an agreement to reunify the island as a federation.

It is instructive to consider the current political outlook and calculations on both sides in the island and in Turkey since the failed Cypriot referenda on the Annan plan ten years ago. The Greek Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus has used its veto to check Turkey's EU accession course since 2004 in the hope of wringing Turkish concessions on Cyprus. But Ankara has not budged. Greek Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades is in an unenviable predicament. He needs better terms than were on offer in the UN plan to sway Greek Cypriot voters who massively rejected the Annan plan in 2004, to support a new settlement. But the chances of achieving improved terms for Greek Cypriots are uncertain at best.

The DIKO party recently abandoned the governing coalition led by Anastasiades' DISY party over perceived Greek Cypriot concessions in the communique that launched the latest round of intercommunal negotiations. This is a reminder of the political constraints that limit Anastasiades' room for manoeuvre. In fact, he faces the same challenge as any Greek Cypriot leader who backs a settlement acceptable to Turkish Cypriots, namely persuading his electorate to accept the merits of a bi-zonal federation in which the Turkish Cypriot minority will enjoy political equality with the Greek Cypriot majority. This will be a tall order.

Turkish Cypriot president Dervis Eroglu is no more committed to a federal settlement than most Greek Cypriots. As a long-time champion of separate Turkish Cypriot statehood, he would have no regrets if the attempts to reunify the island were unsuccessful. Still, he remains engaged in talks to find a settlement because Ankara supports renewed talks and a large segment of the Turkish community supports a federal union with Greek Cypriots. Eroglu and Ankara believe that they have acquired a new leverage over Greek Cypriots because the only practical method of exporting Cypriot gas is by pipeline to nearby Turkey. This can only be achieved if a Cyprus settlement is forthcoming.

Of course, energy-poor Turkey will benefit greatly as well if the project to ship Cypriot (presumably together with Israeli) gas was realized. But two key encumbrances are bound to inhibit Turkey's interest in the Cypriot negotiations, at least in the short term. The first is the decline in Turkey's prospects of EU membership. It will be recalled that the strong desire to secure an EU accession course was the principal motivation for Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (the AKP) to play a supportive role in achieving a Cyprus settlement during the Annan negotiations (2002-2004). After repeated rebuffs, the AKP leadership no longer expects Turkey to be admitted to the EU. Secondly, the massive corruption scandal that broke out in mid-December 2013, involving Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his family and some key members of his cabinet, has created a major political crisis in Turkey and forced Erdogan to fight for his political life. He is therefore unlikely to remain adequately engaged with the Cyprus file and defend likely Turkish concessions against charges of sell-out by Turkish nationalists. It is difficult to envisage a Cyprus settlement without Turkey's active involvement in the intercommunal negotiations.

For all the understandable expectations that have been generated by the re-launch of the peace talks in some circles, most Greek and Turkish Cypriots remain guarded about the chances of a settlement. They are wise to do so.