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Κώπρη

CYPRUS

THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION

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5

1997: Missiles and Missed Opportunities

✕ The year 1997 did not start well. Within a few days of the beginning of the year it was announced that the Greek Cypriots had signed a contract with Russia to purchase S300 surface-to-air missiles. This was only the latest in a series of arms purchases by the government of Cyprus which, together with mounting Turkish deployments, had resulted in the island being one of the most heavily armed places on earth. But this latest purchase was qualitatively rather different from previous ones and potentially more destabilizing. The missiles in question had a range sufficient to shoot down Turkish aircraft taking off from their bases in southern Turkey from where the Turks provided air cover for their troops on the island (neither they nor the Greeks stationed military aircraft in Cyprus). They therefore represented a challenge to Turkish air supremacy in the event of hostilities. And so did a further Greek Cypriot decision to construct a military airbase at Paphos in the west of the island, with hardened shelters for aircraft, which would enable Greek planes to be deployed in a time of tension.

The effect of these developments on the prospects for settlement negotiations were entirely negative and were not much mitigated by an assurance immediately given to a US envoy by Clerides that the missiles would not arrive on the island before the end of 1997 at the earliest (this was in fact no concession at all, since the missiles had not yet begun to be manufactured). The reaction in the north of the island and in Ankara was strong, and the Turkish foreign minister in particular made some extremely bellicose statements which implied, although they did not state it in terms, that force might be used either to prevent the delivery of the missiles from Russia or against them once deployed. While there were some indications that the Turkish general staff, who were no fans of the Erbakan/Ciller government, were unhappy about the strength and speci-

ficity of the threats made by their government, it was clear that complacency about what might happen if deployment went ahead would not be justified. Meanwhile one of the centrepieces of the Greek Cypriot negotiating position for a settlement, a proposal that the whole island be demilitarized, was left looking distinctly forlorn, if not positively hypocritical. Other consequences were that the Greek Cypriots lost the moral high ground on which they had been comfortably encamped and that many of the diplomatic efforts of the United States, Britain and the other European countries over the next two years had to be diverted to avoiding deployment of the missiles rather than being focused on persuading the Turks and Turkish Cypriots to show more flexibility at the negotiating table.

Discussion of these unfortunate developments with the Greek Cypriots was not easy, nor, for a long time, particularly fruitful. They argued with some emotion that they had the right to defend themselves against the very substantial Turkish military presence in the north of the island and on the mainland opposite Cyprus. They brushed aside the suggestion that they were in any way acting in a manner inconsistent with the numerous Security Council resolutions that had urged all parties to avoid a military build-up on the island. And in private Clerides was prone to suggest that the missile purchase was a kind of negotiating ploy designed to bring Denktash and the Turks to the negotiating table. The trouble was that none of these arguments were either valid or particularly convincing. Acquiring these missiles neither increased the security of the Greek Cypriots nor did it make the Turks and Turkish Cypriots more likely to negotiate a settlement. On the first aspect, powerful though the missiles were, they could not hope to undermine the massive Turkish air superiority nor did they change the facts of geography. And it was those facts – the distance of Cyprus from Greece and its proximity to Turkey, and the consequent impossibility for Greece to resupply or to reinforce Cyprus in a time of hostilities, which had been amply demonstrated in 1974 – that remained unaltered by the latest arms purchase and meant that the best form of security for the Greek Cypriots was an internationally guaranteed settlement and not the acquisition of additional weapons systems. Moreover the nature of the new weapons system ensured that if there ever was a Greek-Turkish military confrontation, there would be no hope of avoiding its spilling over into Cyprus, since the Turks would not be likely to leave such a threat to their mainland airbases untouched. As to making the Turks more inclined to negotiate with flexibility, the

opposite was the case. Not only did the rather febrile atmosphere in Ankara mean that there was a premium on an aggressively nationalistic response, but even cooler Turkish heads were quite capable of working out that if an arms purchase such as this could be shown or be believed to have softened up their negotiating position, then there would be no end to further such purchases.

Nor did attempts by the Americans and the British to persuade the Russians to cancel or at least to delay delivery of the missiles bear any fruit. When I spoke to Vladimir Chizov, the Russian Special Representative, on a visit to London in February I got no change at all. Chizov was a well-informed and sophisticated operator and there was no reason to doubt Russian support for a new UN-led effort to get a settlement. But that support did not include reining in arms supplies in the meanwhile, and the argument that these were contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of Security Council resolutions was met with a degree of obfuscation worthy of Soviet diplomacy at the height of the Cold War. In effect Russia had a two-track policy – support for settlement negotiations and selling any weapons the Greek Cypriots would buy – and they pursued both tracks without admitting any inconsistency between them throughout the whole period of the negotiations. This was some improvement on their Cold War policy of using the Cyprus problem politically to stir up trouble within NATO, but not much.

So there matters stood on the missiles all through 1997, and, with a presidential election looming in Cyprus in February 1998, it became clear that the missiles would neither be delivered nor cancelled ahead of that. But they hung heavily over the first attempt to get a new negotiation under way.

Another shoe drops

By the end of 1996, and following the Rifkind visit to Nicosia, it had become relatively clear that a resumption of negotiations was on the cards in 1997. But the Turkish attitude to this had not yet been clarified and that was a crucial element. In mid-February I was able to have a long discussion over a working breakfast in London with Onur Oymen, at that time the under-secretary (PUS in our parlance) in the Turkish foreign ministry. It was never very easy to understand precisely where in Ankara policy on Cyprus was made and where the decision-taking buck stopped. But it became steadily clearer as the years went by that the under-secretary was on this issue the focal point where all the threads came

together. Our talk on that occasion over breakfast, although far from a meeting of minds, went quite well and Oymen said he would do his best to ensure that the foreign minister (Ciller) cleared her mind on the subject before I visited Ankara a week later and that she would see me on that occasion (as she had not done when I had last visited Ankara the previous October). He was as good as his word on both points.

Getting to see Ciller was no straightforward matter. She did not transact business at the foreign ministry but from the official residence that she had occupied when she was prime minister and where she was still installed. Nor did she see foreign ministry officials to prepare for meetings with visitors; all that was handled by Oymen, who alone appeared to have access to the residence, thus ensuring a considerable bottleneck and much delay. So we kicked our heels for some time in the Ciller anteroom before Oymen finally appeared to say that all was ready. He asked rather nervously that I should remember that she was a strong-willed person who did not like being contradicted. I said that, having worked for Margaret Thatcher for some 11 years, I did have some experience of that phenomenon. We were then ushered in, accompanied by a substantial portion of the Ankara press corps, television cameras and all. The whole meeting was conducted in their presence. Ciller said straightaway that Turkey believed that the time had come for Cyprus negotiations to resume and that it would support a UN initiative to that effect. She fired off some remarks about the need for the EU to unblock its financial commitments to Turkey and for the Russian missiles not to be deployed on the island. There was not a great deal for me to do but to agree on all these points while pointing out that none of them were in our gift.

I was also able to see in Ankara on that occasion the junior minister responsible for day-to-day relations with north Cyprus and in particular for the extensive Turkish aid programme there (thought to be running at about \$200 million a year and rising, although no official figures were ever published and that did not include the cost of military support). Abdullah Gül (who became prime minister following the November 2002 general election and then deputy prime minister and foreign minister when the political impediments on his party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, were lifted in March 2003) made an immediately positive impression. Smiling, intelligent and well informed, he had studied in Britain. He readily accepted that the status quo in Cyprus was neither ideal nor easily sustainable in the long term. He set out Turkey's requirements for politi-

tered the first occasion when the Turkish Cypriots (and by implication the Turks) accepted the possibility that north Cyprus might be part of the EU before Turkey was. And while the initiative as such was dead on arrival, the Turks were later to regret allowing Denktash to nail his (and their) colours to the confederation mast, thus greatly complicating the conduct of the settlement negotiations when they eventually got under way.

The missiles diverted

By the autumn of 1998 the question of the S300 missiles was again becoming acute and it was clear that their deployment to the island could not be much longer fudged or delayed. For one thing the missiles themselves were ready for shipment and the Russians were agitating for payment; for another, Clerides had been re-elected in February on a platform of commitment to deployment, and his coalition partners, led by Vasos Lyssarides, had made it clear that they would only remain in the government if the missiles were deployed. The press was contributing to a noticeable increase in tension, with speculation in the Turkish press that action, even the use of force, might be taken to prevent their delivery from Russia. The pressure on Clerides from the US, the UK and the other Europeans to cancel or suspend deployment mounted steadily and began to have some effect. Clerides began to try out half-and-half approaches. Perhaps the missiles could be shipped to Cyprus but kept in hangars and not deployed. It was pointed out that this would not help much and would create a situation whereby any subsequent decision to deploy during a time of crisis would risk being seen by the Turks as a clear step towards actual hostilities. In addition to messages from the US president and the UK prime minister, Wolfgang Schüssel, the Austrian foreign minister, weighed in in his capacity as president of the EU Council. He explained very frankly that the EU and its member states would simply not understand it if Clerides proceeded with deployment when accession negotiations were under way and efforts were being made to achieve a Cyprus settlement before accession. The implications of this last message were very clear and they were not missed either in Nicosia or in Athens.

At this stage the Greek government reached a clear conclusion that they did not want to run the risk of a full-scale Greek-Turkish confrontation, which could well occur if deployment of the missiles went ahead. They began to discuss with the Greek Cypriots the possibility of divert-

ing the missiles to Crete and possibly replacing them with shorter-range missiles already in the Greek inventory. This alternative plan rapidly took shape during December 1998. While the Turks continued to grumble a good deal, it became clear that the switch to Crete (which was considerably further from the Turkish mainland than Cyprus and put Turkish airbases out of range) and the fact that the missiles would no longer be under Greek Cypriot control, made a substantial difference and that diversion in this way would in fact mark the end of the crisis. There remained serious political problems for Clerides whose U-turn had provoked outrage in the press and the resignation of several ministers. Clerides let it be known at this stage that it was essential for him to be able to say that diversion of the missiles had been decided in order to give a new opportunity for negotiations for a settlement. In response to this appeal the US president and the British prime minister issued statements committing themselves to a 'major, sustained effort towards securing a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement in Cyprus' and to give 'complete and wholehearted backing to this effort'. In this way the scene was set for 1999. But everything remained to be done. And there was as yet no Turkish or Turkish Cypriot commitment to this objective.

7

1999: Getting the Show on the Road Again

With the diversion of the S300 missiles to Crete and a slow thaw beginning in the EU/Turkey relationship, the strength of some of the extraneous factors impeding a Cyprus settlement negotiation was beginning to abate. But the barometer was certainly not set fair. For one thing the mood in Cyprus itself remained distinctly sour. On the Greek Cypriot side there was considerable bitterness over the whole missile episode, seen as yet another occasion when Cyprus was manoeuvred around like a pawn by external forces over which it had no control. The possibility that acquiring the missiles could have been an expensive mistake, providing not increased security but instead more tension and risk, was hardly contemplated by anyone on any part of the political spectrum. On the other side of the island Denktash continued his boycott of any contact with the EU. So, when I visited the island in late January for an annual Heads of Mission conference with the British ambassadors from Ankara and Athens and the British high commissioner in Nicosia, I ran into a steady drizzle of Cypriot negativism. Arriving at Larnaca Airport I met by chance the Greek deputy foreign minister, Kranidiotis, on his way out. He warned me that Clerides was feeling bruised and that he himself had just been given an extremely rough ride by the Greek Cypriot press, an unusual occurrence for a Greek minister and one of Cypriot origin. This warning was soon borne out when a passing answer I gave the press about the possible relevance of the Swiss constitution to arrangements for a reunited Cyprus was blown up out of all proportion and led to Clerides refusing to see me, as had earlier been agreed. The same day Denktash declined to pay any attention to the fact that I no longer (with the end of the Austrian EU presidency and the advent of the German one) had any EU function, and also refused to see me. So any idea that carrying out the prime minister's and President Clinton's recent

commitments to launch a new drive for a settlement – the same drive that Clerides had begged for when diverting the S300s – would be simple or easy was rapidly dissipated.

The question of how to proceed with these commitments had in fact already been discussed between the UK, the Americans and the UN. Miller, who by now was effectively in charge of day-to-day Cyprus policy in Washington, had come to London early in January, as had Dame Ann Hercus, the New Zealander who was running the UNFICYP operation on the island. We and the Americans were clear that we would have to give a lead in the next phase. It was evident that the Cypriots would not do so. There was no sign of help from the two motherlands, and the UN seemed bereft of ideas and unwilling to put in a real effort until they could see that the door was at least partly ajar. We were equally clear that failure to follow up on the US/UK commitments was a poor option in the medium and longer term. The Greek Cypriot feeling of alienation would increase, as would the risk of further destabilizing arms purchases. And the steady progress of Cyprus's EU accession negotiations brought closer a possible confrontation with Turkey over accession by a divided island. We also agreed that this time we should be aiming not simply at a Clerides/Denktash one-off meeting with an uncertain follow-up, but rather at a structured process that would involve the two sides, under UN aegis, becoming involved in serious negotiations on the core issues. Miller floated the idea of using the annual G8 Summit, due in June, as a launch pad for such a process and from then on the US and the UK, as two of the participants, began to work systematically to achieve that.

Three earthquakes: a transformation of Greek-Turkish relations

The first of the three 1999 earthquakes was not of the seismic variety, although the latter two were. Nor did any of them have much to do with Cyprus, although their indirect impact on the Cyprus problem was considerable.

The first earthquake occurred in February when Abdullah Ocalan, the fugitive leader of the Kurdish PKK terrorist movement was, following his capture in Kenya and return to Turkey, found to have been being sheltered in the Greek embassy in Nairobi and to have travelled on the passport of a Greek Cypriot journalist. This led, not unnaturally, to a major diplomatic row between Greece and Turkey and then to the resignation of Greek foreign minister Pangalos and a number of the other Greek ministers concerned and finally to Pangalos's replacement as