



Lessons from Cyprus for Israel–Palestine: Can Negotiations Still Work?



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A. Introduction

Like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Cyprus conflict has been a protracted, unresolved conflict for roughly five decades. The two conflicts share ethno-nationalist and territorial dimensions; tension between a sovereign state and a sub-state entity, and a hostile military presence; decades of failed negotiations, with both sides showing ambiguous commitment to the intended political framework for resolution (two states, or a federated state, respectively); and high involvement of the international community. This paper maps points of comparison related to conflict resolution efforts in both cases, including references to the civil society, public, political leadership, and negotiation processes.

One key finding of this paper is that Cyprus is not a healthy example of conflict management rather than resolution, as Israelis often believe, given the political costs of non-resolution. Second, the Cyprus conflict shows that despite long-term diplomatic stagnation, negotiations can be meaningfully revived through bold leadership, but that the consequences of their failure can be high. Third, efforts to resolve the Cyprus conflict exemplify that even potential benefits and positive incentives such as economic gain may not be sufficient for negotiations to succeed. In some cases, disincentives may also be needed. Fourth, public support is essential – especially in the event of a referendum but even without one. Finally, the two regions share certain core conflict issues and they can borrow or learn from policy options that have emerged regarding them. Two areas where they stand to gain from such learning are refugees, and models of governance.

This paper is part of an ongoing program at the Mitvim Institute comparing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to other conflicts in order to generate new ideas for de-escalating and advancing Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.¹

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¹ A background paper explaining the reasoning and logic behind the project is available here, full reference: Dahlia Scheindlin, "[The curse of stagnation and the need for conflict comparisons: Seeking a breakthrough towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution](#)," *Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy*, May 2016.

B. Background on the Cyprus Conflict

Divisions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots over identity, culture, religion, language and nation, territory and historical rights form the basis of a conflict over sovereignty and governance in a divided society. When Cyprus became independent in 1960, its constitution established a consociational government representing both groups, but the arrangement fell apart in 1963.² The next eleven years brought early forms of population separation and rising tension; in 1974, an attempted coup by Greek nationalists against the Greek-Cypriot (GC) government led to two Turkish military invasions and the ethnic and territorial division of the island. The Turkish army remains in the north to the present, where the Turkish-Cypriot (TC) leadership declared independence in 1983 (recognized only by Turkey).³

Greece, Turkey, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) are key actors in the conflict and efforts at resolution. Since 1968, bi-lateral negotiations have been held around the form of governance and power-sharing, and since 1974, over reunification; other core issues since 1974 include property compensation, refugee claims and missing persons, security and the role of guarantor powers, economic relations between the two communities and EU relations. Governance has been envisioned mostly through the framework of a “bi-zonal, bi-communal federation” – a unitary state comprised of two federated states with significant autonomy.⁴ Dynamics among the people of Cyprus include ethnic fears, lack of trust, and demographic concerns.⁵

In 2004, a UN-sponsored reunification plan (the Annan Plan) was rejected by GCs in a referendum, while the TC side supported it; after the failed referendum, the recognized Republic of Cyprus (RoC) acceded to the EU.⁶ Negotiations, held intermittently but unfruitfully in the interim, were renewed with more energy in 2015 to high anticipation and halting progress.⁷ If they fail and the current situation continues, incremental developments may slowly change the contours of the conflict, and possibilities for resolution.

² Kenan Atakol, “Turkish and Greek Cypriots in Conflict,” in Judy Carter, George Irani, and Vamik D. Volkan (Eds.), *Regional and Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives from the Front Lines*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

³ For more on the background of the conflict, see James Ker-Lindsay, *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Yiannis Papadakis, Nicos Peristianis, and Gisela Welz (Eds.), *Divided Cyprus: Modernity, History and an Island in Conflict*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *Hostage to History: Cyprus from the Ottomans to Kissinger, Second Edition*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1997).

⁴ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “Could the Cyprus Issue Be Solved in 2016?,” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 8 March 2016. Web. 1 July 2016.

⁵ The question of demographics population refers mainly to the north, since GC refugees have longed to return, while TC refugees from the south have not significantly adopted the narrative or policy goal of return.

⁶ Helena Smith, “Greek Cypriot Voters Set to Derail UN Plan for Islands Reunification: President and Church Stand Accused Ahead of Today’s Referendum,” *The Guardian*, 24 April 2004. Web. 25 June 2016.

⁷ “Chronology of Events: Cyprus,” *Security Council Report*, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/cyprus.php?page=all&print=true>

C. Comparison: Parallels and Contrasts

This section considers aspects of the Cyprus problem that overlap with Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, organized around themes related to civil society, the public, the elites, negotiations and related processes. Numerous additional elements could also be compared – the role of the international community, or the problem of so-called “settlers,” for example. The aspects shown here were selected for their potential to yield practical insights for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a focus on negotiations and supporting elements. Each topic can be expanded greatly in its own right.

- **Civil society – home front, the other side, and spoilers.** Peace-oriented civil society actors in Cyprus and in Israel/Palestine both seek to change negative social dynamics, support negotiations, and foster bi-lateral reconciliation. In both regions, these groups have been accused of normalizing, straying or betraying their people, or airing dirty laundry abroad instead of speaking to their societies. In Cyprus, TC civil society rallied large numbers in the population to support the Annan Plan. Some perceive GC civil society as less supportive, and point to other social organizations such as sports and religious communities in the south that encourage a nationalist agenda – which is discouraging to the TC side. Similarly, Israelis often complain that Palestinian civil society is concerned more with criticizing Israel than with fostering peace, while downplaying their own spoilers such as nationalist sports clubs or religious figures. Thus in both locations, there is a perception (and accusation) that one side shows more grassroots support for peace than the other; while other social institutions can act as spoilers. Cooperation across lines (Israelis and Palestinians, or TCs and GCs) can often lead to accusations of disloyalty, which challenges the legitimacy of pro-peace actors in their own communities.
- **Committed leadership – capitalize quickly.** Political will of the leaders is a prominent factor in diplomatic progress. Israel and Egypt signed a deal following the political commitment of Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat; Yassir Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin (eventually) devoted themselves to the Oslo accords.⁸ Conversely, unwilling leaders are a sure route to failure: In 2004, certain key Cypriot leaders openly opposed the agreement, contributing to its defeat in the GC referendum.⁹ By contrast, both the current GC and TC leaders – Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akıncı, respectively – have been committed to conciliation in the past. As leaders, they were able to rapidly revive resolution efforts in the present.¹⁰ But good will may not withstand political developments: since the revival of negotiations in 2015 in Cyprus, the May 2016 parliamentary elections in the RoC weakened Anastasiades’ party, and the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016 could lower the urgency on

⁸ Political will is not a foolproof formula, as seen in the failure of Ehud Barak and Yassir Arafat, who were unable to reach a deal at Camp David in 2000 – although historians will continue to debate the extent of actual political will among the two.

⁹ The President of RoC, Tassos Papadopoulos, was famously opposed; while the longtime leader Rauf Denktaş also opposed the agreement on the Turkish Cypriot side. His position was balanced, and ultimately overshadowed by the new Prime Minister Mehmet Ali Talat and other social forces.

¹⁰ Nikos Anastasiades, the Greek-Cypriot President since 2013, was the only party leader to endorse the Annan Plan, an unpopular position in 2004. Mustafa Akıncı, President of TRNC since April 2015, is well-known for his cooperative approach to the Greek Cypriot community during his years as mayor of Nicosia, between 1976-1990. Neofytos Loizides, “Transformations of the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot Right: Right Wing Peace-makers?” In Nicos Trimikliniotis and Umut Bozkurt (Eds.), *Beyond a Divided Cyprus: A State and Society in Transformation*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 189.

Cyprus.¹¹ Presidential elections in the south in 2017 could further slow the process as a campaign gets underway. Political will is a resource that should be capitalized upon before events overtake intentions.

- **Leverage economic incentives, acknowledge obstacles.** Peace agreements are presumed to be economically beneficial. The 2013 economic crash in Cyprus may have raised the need for a “peace dividend,”¹² for example by opening up Turkish markets for RoC. TCs too have an ongoing incentive to improve their economic position by making EU markets accessible, also in order to increase their independence from Turkey.¹³ Explorations of natural gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean also hold major economic potential; an agreement in Cyprus with Turkey’s blessing would facilitate the exploitation of this resource to the benefit of all sides.¹⁴ But in Cyprus, the potential benefits appear to have provided only a limited incentive. Some believe GCs would sustain more costs, while the TC side stands to gain more (starting from a weaker economic position) – lowering urgency for RoC. When RoC entered the EU in 2004, the apparently healthy economy created little immediate financial incentive for a resolution.¹⁵ Similarly, in Israel-Palestine, promises of large economic dividends have not been compelling for Israelis, who have access to global markets and regularly ignore the costs of occupation. There are also economic benefits to the status quo that tend to be ignored in analysis.¹⁶
- **Incentives/disincentives.** The chances of success or failure of negotiations are valuable for determining whether to hold them (in light of the dangers above). To determine these chances, negotiators must assess what incentives or disincentives exist for the process succeed. For example, in 2004, RoC knew that much-desired EU accession was already secured with or without reunification. Thus rejecting the agreement had no significant consequences and left people free to take a maximalist approach, holding out for a “better deal.” Similarly, Israel has little incentive to make concessions – like RoC, there are simply few consequences for avoiding them. At the same time, Palestinians ought to have had more incentive to compromise given their dire circumstances (just as the disadvantaged TCs

¹¹ Regarding the May elections, author conversation with Umut Bozkurt, Assistant Professor Department of Political Science and International Relations, Eastern Mediterranean University. 27 June 2016

¹² Author conversation with Neophytos Loizides, Reader in International Conflict Analysis, University of Kent. 20 May 2016.

¹³ Tony Barber, “Cyprus: Crossing the Divide.” *The Financial Times*, 25 January 2015. Web. 25 June 2016. Alexander Apostolides and Mustafa Besim, *The Cyprus Peace Dividend Revisited: A productivity and sectoral approach* (Oslo: Peace Research Institute of Oslo, 2014).

¹⁴ With Turkey and Israel improving their relations in part for the same reason, it is also not a given that non-resolution in Cyprus will hinder exploitation, processing and transfer of natural gas. Turkey may seek to bypass RoC and hence the urgency for an agreement declines. However, this very possibility could also be an incentive for RoC to avoid such a situation, by working towards an agreement that would ensure it is not left out.

¹⁵ See for example Fiona Mullen, Öslem Öguz and Praxoula Antoniadou Kyriacou, “The Day After: Commercial Opportunities following a solution to the Cyprus problem,” *PRIO, Cyprus Centre*, 2008. On the economic benefits of a solution, and for an opposing view, see: George Georgiou, “Cyprus: Economic Consequences of Reunification,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 20(3), Summer 2009, pp. 51-62. Both were written prior to the 2013 economic crash in RoC.

¹⁶ Shlomo Svirsky, “*Nes Gadol Haya Po*: The economic policy of the second Netanyahu government, 2009-2012,” *Adva Center*, November 2013, p. 23. (Hebrew)

supported the Annan Plan), but still they have been on the rejectionist side at times. This may reflect underestimation of the cost, or overestimation of the potential to improve their positions, by holding out.

- **Negotiations – assess danger.** Failed negotiations in Cyprus have contributed to stagnation and ongoing distrust. Failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have sometimes preceded severe escalations, such as Camp David 2000 (followed by the second Intifada), and the 2014 negotiations led by US Secretary of State John Kerry, whose failure preceded a wave of violence and another war in the summer of 2014.¹⁷ Negotiations may only be a trigger but they underscore dangers. There is also a political cost, as barren negotiations can alter political possibilities. If the current Cyprus process fails, it may mean the end of one paradigm for resolution (a federated state) and open the way for an evolving two-state reality.¹⁸ The specter of outright annexation of the north by Turkey is a worst-case scenario for RoC and undesirable for TCs as well. Similarly, many now feel that failed negotiations in Israel have delayed resolution to the point where the two-state model may not be feasible; Palestinians openly blame lengthy negotiations for expansion of occupation. The Israeli-Palestinian alternatives, a unitary state that is either non-democratic or bi-national are considered very poor options for both sides. Negotiations are still the best possible route to conflict resolution. But the dangers in the case of failure should also be assessed in order to determine whether they are desirable at the moment. Analyzing incentives and disincentives as observed above can help with this assessment.
- **Referendum – never take the public for granted.** A central factor in the GC “no” vote in 2004 was the negative attitudes of the leadership towards the agreement, covered intensively in the media.¹⁹ Domestic and international advocates of the agreement did not appreciate the growing force of the “no” camp until it was too late for a serious campaign in favor. In the north of Cyprus, the large-scale activism generated by pro-peace groups, and the support of the Prime Minister combined to help achieve strong majority support. In Israel, existing legislation requires a vote in the event of ceding sovereign territory, and there are serious lessons to be learned from Cyprus. The first is that the public cannot be presumed to support an agreement based on the abstract notion of peace; their vote must be earned. A second lesson – this time from the Israel-Palestine experience – is that even without a referendum, the perception of public opposition can constrain leaders. During the 2000 Camp David negotiations, for example, some believe that Arafat’s failure to prime the Palestinian public led to an environment of opposition. This looped back

¹⁷ One could also include the failed negotiations between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas that preceded the first of three wars between Israel and Gaza. It is a stretch to presume negotiations were a clear cause, but the case can be made that another negotiation failure for Fatah emboldened Hamas to provoke both sides with escalation.

¹⁸ Herbert Faustmann alluded to this in conversation – for Cyprus this is considered a more extreme solution indicating full separation of the island, and for RoC, full loss over the north. James Ker Lindsay has also cited the remote possibility that Turkey advances annexation of the north. Author conversations: Herbert Faustmann, Associate Professor for History and Political Science at the University of Nicosia, 24 May 2016; James Ker Lindsay, Senior Research Fellow, London School of Economics, 28 January 2016.

¹⁹ For a full analysis on the role of the media, see Yiouli Taki and Erol Kaymak, “The Annan Plan 2004: A Study of the Information Environment & An Outline of International Referendum Standards,” *Politics*, 2005; and “The Cyprus Stalemate: What Next?,” *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report N°171, 8 March 2006, p. 5.

to constrain Arafat from agreeing to needed concessions.²⁰ It seems that if the leadership either undermines or even fails to make a strong enough case, voters are likely to take their cue. A referendum campaign is also an opportunity to leverage the infrastructure already in place by pro-peace civil society groups.

- **Conflict management? No status quo.** During decades of apparent political stagnation, the GC position has eroded over time. Although as a recognized state it appears to be the stronger party, each subsequent negotiation in Cyprus has involved greater compromise on the structure of governance away from a unitary state.²¹ The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), on the other hand, becomes entrenched over time, along with de facto separation. Turkish migrants, (or settlers), have changed the demographic and political reality in the north.

Further, on the geo-political level, Turkey is an ever-more essential ally to the West given the current chaos in the Middle East. It turns out that the “status quo” in Cyprus is changing beneath the surface, and in various ways working against the side that appears to be the stronger party (RoC). The current Israeli government has conducted de facto conflict management rather than resolution, and Cyprus is sometimes cited as a positive model. Even beyond far greater level of violence in Israel-Palestine, Israel too faces demographic changes in the population living between from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean, and a hardening international environment. Israel should learn from Cyprus that surface stability may be covering up erosion that harms its position, even as the putatively stronger party.

- **Overlapping core issues – refugees and property; governance and power-sharing.** These are among the most sensitive core issues in both conflicts. Refugees and property are linked to symbolic meaning, demography, identity and historic justice as well as hard security concerns. One reason the GC side voted down the Annan Plan was dissatisfaction with proposals on this issue, echoing the tenacity of Palestinian demands for satisfactory solutions on the issue.²² In both conflicts, a range of solutions have been proposed over the years, but the sensitivities and willingness to sacrifice even an agreement over this cannot be underestimated. On governance, comparisons appear to be increasingly valuable. In Israel-Palestine, negotiations have traditionally been geared towards two states, but this would involve extensive cooperation on issues such as resource and environmental management, security and shared economic needs. Jerusalem will inevitably remain highly linked even if divided. The mechanisms in Cyprus for managing divided Nicosia, or those proposed under the presumed federated structure of Cyprus, may be useful even in a two-state model. Moreover, as the two-state solution loses feasibility in Israel-Palestine, there is increasing interest in confederation and other cooperative models. Here, the various Cypriot plans and

²⁰ Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative and the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 59.

²¹ James Ker-Lindsay, “A History of Cyprus Peace Proposals,” in Hubert Faustmann and Andrekos Varnava (Eds.), *Reunifying Cyprus: The Annan Plan and Beyond*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009), p. 16.

²² Alexis Heraclides, “The Cyprus Problem: An Open and Shut Case? Probing the Greek-Cypriot Rejection of the Annan Plan.” *The Cyprus Review* 16(2), 2004, p. 37. ProQuest. Web. 25 June 2016.

specific solutions such as cross-community voting arrangements, may be instructive.²³

D. Lessons and Recommendations

This section is focused on learning from the negotiations in Cyprus that may lead to a breakthrough in the coming months. They may also stall. But with the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process effectively halted, the experience of Cyprus offers insights either way.

Israel often views Cyprus as evidence that conflict management may be preferable to a peace agreement that divides and angers both sides of the conflict. A closer look at Cyprus shows that beyond the enviable absence of violence, the political developments of non-resolution have been negative for both sides.

In Cyprus, decades of non-resolution are slowly advancing permanent division of the island. Failure of the current round could put the TRNC closer than ever to either international recognition, or accelerated – even if informal – Turkish dominance. These scenarios would be a disaster from RoC's perspective; while greater de facto Turkish control is undesirable for TCs as well.

Similarly, Israel and Palestinians must acknowledge that even when violence is low, the political status quo is eroding. Israel stands to lose the option of being both a Jewish and democratic state; for Palestinians, each new decade has brought dwindling political offerings, and steadily worsening conditions in daily life. Conflict management is actually conflict deterioration and should be rejected as a policy goal.

Despite longtime diplomatic stagnation, Cyprus shows that a frozen political environment can be rapidly unblocked when both leaders are politically committed to advancing resolution. However, matching pro-agreement leadership does not guarantee success, and various other aspects are needed to strengthen the chances for resolution:

First, third parties and international actors need to assess realistic incentives. In Cyprus, as in Israel and Palestine, positive incentives or peace dividends have simply not been sufficient. If negotiations re-start in Israel and Palestine based only on hypothetical benefits of peace, with no concrete cost of failure, they are unlikely to succeed – with the accompanying dangers described in this paper. If guaranteed EU accession for RoC meant there was no cost for rejection of the agreement in 2004, perhaps membership in desired clubs should be conditioned on progress. Loss of membership can also be a relevant cost. Inclusion of loss in such clubs is relevant for Israel and the Palestinians alike. It avoids the invasiveness of economic sanctions or other forms of intervention – but sends a substantive signal.

Second, the current Cypriot negotiations highlight the dangers of negotiations that take too long. Since the talks began in 2015, most regional developments observed in this paper are burdening the process or removing incentives for resolution. When the leadership constellation is right, negotiations should set an ambitious timeline, and add

²³ Alvaro de Soto, UN Negotiator for the Annan Plan, worked with experts on constitutional frameworks for power-sharing to reach the proposal for Cyprus in 2004 (Author conversation, 17 February 2016). This is a reminder that there is cumulative and comparative knowledge available about different constitutional models for consideration also in Israel-Palestinian (or other conflicts).

modest, interim, or symbolic goals to the process. Even small achievements can generate momentum and progress for the final agreement, and can generate good will needed to sustain energy during the slower, more sensitive parts of negotiations.

Third, public support matters. If there is a referendum, Cyprus showed how inadequate public support leads to a profound and historic lost opportunity. Israel too may hold a referendum; Palestinians probably will not. But even without a vote, leaders are empowered or constrained in negotiations by public attitudes, and cannot afford to neglect them. Cyprus showed that last-minute appeals to the public are too late.

Civil society actors can strengthen the debate and discourse about the broad contours of an agreement long before negotiations, even when the diplomatic horizon looks barren. This can include pro-peace NGOs but the latter will always face social suspicion. Social institutions or figures with fewer “left-wing” connotations should be mobilized as well, and civil society should make sure to work internally, not only bi-laterally. Perhaps most importantly, elected leaders or their proxies should actively discuss, debate (even disagree) and thus legitimize the basic concepts of a future agreement publicly, *prior to* negotiations. If leaders do not, this may signal that they are not meaningfully committed to resolution.

Finally, Cyprus and Israel share significant conflict issues, but there are two key issues for useful comparison. The problem of refugees, property and compensation is a burning emotional wound laden with historic and symbolic significance for RoC, just as for Palestinians. Cyprus shows that some are apparently willing to sacrifice all potential peace dividends for the perception of justice. In Cyprus, negotiations generally acknowledge the historical experience of displacement, along with the need for compensation or restoration. This is an alternative to the broad rejectionism in Israeli discourse regarding the Palestinian refugee issue. The range of policies for implementation do not differ as much as this overall outlook – and the overall approach sets a tone of either cooperation or confrontation.

Further, models for governance offer relevant comparisons even if the overall frameworks (two states, versus a federated state) differ at present. Both conflicts involve two entities on a bounded geographic region. Even the two-state separation envisioned for Israel and Palestine will require extensive cooperation and joint agencies that can draw on Cypriot models. Further, if the two-state solution evolves towards shared sovereignty models, and Cyprus has moved towards more separation-oriented models of federation – policies such as such as cross-community residency without citizenship, or voting mechanisms – may be increasingly transferrable and relevant.

Ultimately, negotiations are a trying and uncertain path, but still represent an essential route to resolution. The comparisons in this paper has sought to identify the factors that can bolster the chances of their success – or, at least, to help avoid mistakes.

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