THE ORIGIN OF THE CYPRUS QUESTION: 
THE BRITISH POLICY ON THE CREATION OF CYPRUS REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION

Cyprus holds an important place in the United Kingdom’s foreign policy. There was a rather complex situation in Cyprus during the 1950s; the Greeks tried for enosis (the union of Cyprus with Greece), the Turks resisted, arguing either for the status quo or for taksim (partition), while Britain tried to quit the Island with the exception of keeping two air bases. British officials used every opportunity to preserve British influence on the Island. The Cyprus Question was the most difficult issue to the United Kingdom, Greece and Turkey during the second half of the 1950s and it disturbed Turkey’s relations with Greece and the United Kingdom.

The Cyprus Question was the creation of the desires and aggression of two conflicting parties: Greece and the United Kingdom. The Greek Cypriots attempted to exclude the Turkish Cypriots from the Island’s political and economic life and directed terrorist actions against British soldiers and Turks on the Island. There was also a potential threat to the southern border of Turkey. An extreme group within the Greek community wanted to achieve enosis through using violence against their neighbouring community.

Regarding Turkey and the international community, Cyprus is located in a crucial strategic area and simply cannot be left to any hostile power. Greece possesses the Aegean Islands that encircle Turkey’s border.1 Periodically, Greek terrorists attacked first the British and then Turkish Cypriots, causing difficulty in relations between Greece and Britain. Consequently, the Cyprus Question emerged as the most enduring problem between Turkey, Greece and Britain.2

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE CYPRUS QUESTION

The United Kingdom skilfully used the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 as a means to get Cyprus as a base for her naval power. It seemed in 1878, that the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, intended to take the Island as a base to support the Ottoman state against Russian attacks.3 During World War I, on 5 November 1915, Britain announced the inclusion of Cyprus within her dominion. Although the Ottomans did not accept Britain’s sudden inclusion, fait accompli, of Cyprus, the later Republic of Turkey did accept it in July 1923 with the Lausanne Treaty.4 Cyprus became one of the crucial places among the British dominions in the region.
In the 1920s, after the Treaty was agreed, British policy regarding the Turkish population was to reduce the number of Turks through new rules and regulations. According to Article 21 of the Lausanne Treaty, Turks had two years in which to choose either British or Turkish citizenship. If a Turk decided in favour of Turkish citizenship, she or he had to leave the Island within a year from the time of choosing. A number of Turks left the Island and, consequently, the Turkish population decreased as time went by. Britain’s aim was to increase its strength of rule in Cyprus. Because of this policy, the Greek population increased proportionally while the Turkish decreased.

NEW CIRCUMSTANCES FORCED NEW POLICIES

Britain’s Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, visited Cyprus in the spring of 1941 and met on the Island with Şükrü Saracoğlu, Turkey’s Foreign Minister. Both countries, Britain and Turkey, were happy with the status quo on the Island at the time. Later, the Republican Peoples Party government’s Foreign Minister, Necmettin Sadak, did not accept the existence of a Cyprus Question. He stated on 24 January 1950, “We do not have any problem which is called the ‘Cyprus Question’. Cyprus is a part of Britain, I believe they would not give Cyprus to any other country.” The peaceful situation on the Island started to change after the Second World War. The United Kingdom experienced financial difficulties during the Second World War and economic difficulties became obvious after the War. Keeping its dominions in order became a heavy burden on the British budget. In addition, the suppressed people of the dominions started to fight for their independence against British tyranny. Freedom of movement made the delicate situation even more difficult for the British government. When freedom fighters began to win their struggles against their British masters, circumstances, both economic and political, became worse back in Britain. The internal and external situation of the United Kingdom forced the government to re-think and create a new policy. One problematic dominion was Cyprus. Therefore, Britain had to quit Cyprus. The Suez Crisis also proved that Cyprus was not strategically necessary. In fact, instead of keeping the whole Island under British control, two sovereign air bases would be enough for the protection of British interests in the region. The Suez Crisis, therefore, helped the British authorities decide to leave the Island. However, the timing of application of the new policy had to be perfect.

Greece fought with the Allied powers against Germany in the Second World War. The Allied powers allowed Greece to sign a peace treaty with Italy on 10 February 1947. Greece received the Dodecanese Islands (Oniki Adalar) in the Aegean Sea. This incident encouraged Greeks to press for their historical-mythological Megáli Idéa (Great Idea) —Greek expansion into all the lands associated with Greek culture in ancient times. Timing became a crucial policy for Britain as Soviet activities intensively encouraged communism and a reduction in Western influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Sixty percent of Greek Cypriots were communists and most of the municipalities in Cyprus were under communist leadership. This situation was important for Britain. If the Russian-backed communists could push the British out of the Island, communist control in Cyprus would have allowed the Soviet Union a base in the South Western Asian Countries (SWAC).9

CYPRUS IN THE 1950S

The British Prime Ministers, Churchill and Eden, experienced enosis demonstrations when they visited the Island. Cyprus never belonged to Greece. The Greek population was swollen as a result of the policy of exchange of minorities between Turkey and Greece after the Lausanne Treaty and because of the new British policy in the Island. When the Greeks tried to raise the possibility of
Cypriot independence, the British officials, Henry Hopkinson and Anthony Eden, would not accept it. Nonetheless, Greece tried to raise the Cyprus issue in the United Nations between 1952 and 1954. Britain opposed the issue whenever it was brought up in international organisations. When the Prime Minister of Greece, Marshal Papagos, brought up the Cyprus question in a meeting, on 22 September 1953 in Athens, Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister of Britain, refused to discuss it. Britain did not want at that time to give up its sovereignty over the whole of Cyprus. The Turkish UN representative, Selim Sarper, regarded the Cyprus Question as an internal affair for Britain, as Necmettin Sadak stated in 1950. The Greeks’ resolution on self-determination for Cyprus on 16 August 1954 failed in the UN the next day by a vote of 50 to none with eight abstentions. For Turks, the status quo had to be preserved for regional peace. Adnan Menderes, Turkey’s Prime Minister, stated on 18 December 1954, “The Cyprus issue was closed when the UN refused Greece’s claims.” British officials lobbied for this result among the UN members. The case was closed, as the United Kingdom wanted.

The British authorities began to deal with Greek terrorism on the Island in 1955. The National Organisation of Cypriot Struggle (EOKA), with two or three members, started shooting at British officers and planting bombs for enosis. EOKA received direct support from Greece in terms of money, arms, organisation and propaganda. Athens radio helped EOKA despite British protests. Archbishop Makarios preached openly in favour of enosis. While these terrorist activities continued, what was the Turkish Cypriots’ situation and general attitudes towards it? Eden stated in his memoir: “The Turkish-speaking Cypriots were strongly opposed to union with Greece...The Turk is slow to anger, but once roused, he is implacable. Greco-Turkish racial conflict on the Island was a far greater danger than anything EOKA terrorism could contrive.” It seemed, the British authorities knew before hand what the Turkish reaction would be, against the Greeks’ own expectations. The Turks opposed enosis. The Turkish authorities also knew what Britain’s main concern was —i.e. to keep their air bases— and argued for taksim. The British desired to keep and rule the Island, as they wished, at no cost to themselves. In the end, the British plan worked: Turks opposed enosis and the Greeks taksim. If Britain could keep the status quo through a finely balanced policy, it would be able to keep her bases through close economic and educational relations. Cyprus was an essential place for the maintenance of British influence in the SWAC, including the Persian Gulf. The status quo had to be preserved for Turkey’s safety. Therefore, the Island could not be left to Greece. With all these different expectations, negotiations started among the parties.

CONFERENCES TO SOLVE THE CYPRUS QUESTION

Anthony Eden, Lord Salisbury, Harold Macmillan and Lennox-Boyd worked to establish some kind of self-government in Cyprus. They decided to call Greek and Turkish representatives to London to discuss an agreement for the Island. The proposal was for a free Cyprus assembly with an elected majority with full sovereignty on all subjects except defence, foreign affairs and security issues, as the Malta example. There were meetings in Geneva and Strasbourg. Turkey accepted the British proposal, while Greece used the excuse of having to appease fanatical elements at home that felt deeply on the Cyprus issue. Eventually, Athens reluctantly accepted the British offer.

While British officials were working for a conference between four parties, Makarios, in a press conference on 16 July 1955, said: “The Cyprus question does not constitute a political issue between Britain, on the one hand, and Greece and Turkey on the other. The Cyprus issue is purely a question of self-determination and concerns the British Government and the Cypriot people only, and it can
be extended so as to concern the Greek Government, whenever the latter, in interpreting the feeling of the Greek and especially the Cypriot people, acts as the people’s mandatory for the safeguarding of the island’s right of self-determination.” The Turkish newspapers, more outspoken than the official authorities, rejected any Greek domination of the Island. They were against self-determination. If there was to be any discussion of self-determination, then there should also be a discussion of taksim. Turkey was in favour of British sovereignty over Cyprus. Turks also believed that the existence of British power in Cyprus was a protection against Soviet expansionism in the region. Menderes stated on 24 August 1955 that the future of Cyprus should be decided not only according to the ethnic factor, but also the geographic, political, economic, military and historical factors. Cyprus was a continuation of the Anatolian Peninsula for the Turks and the status quo on the Island should be preserved or the Turks should have control of the Island if the solution was not partition or independence.

A Conference about Cyprus took place in London from 29 August to 7 September 1955, but it failed to achieve its objectives. The Greek Foreign Minister, Mr S. Stephanopoulos, demanded the right of self-determination for Cyprus. Greece rejected any plan for self-determination if enosis was not clearly identified as a possible result. Turkey did not even accept self-government without Britain’s assurances that the system in Cyprus would not lead to enosis. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Fatin Rüstü Zorlu, was against self-determination and self-government. He hinted that any change to the status of Cyprus could bring a revision of the Treaty of Lausanne and counter claims against Greece in Thrace and the Dodecanese. The Conference did not produce any solution. In Cyprus, bombings and other outrages continued and the British transferred additional police officers from other colonies. After a bomb detonated at the house of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s birth place in Salonika on the 5th of September 1955, many incidents occurred against the shops and houses of Greek minorities and wealthy Turks in Istanbul and Izmir. The people were terrified. Despite Turkey’s effort to the contrary, the Cyprus problem and the riots weakened Turkish relations with Greece and Yugoslavia within the Balkan Pact of 1954 and in the region.

The United States government became involved in the problem. British officials pointed out that the Greeks were the troublemakers and that the problems would continue until their agitation stopped. Britain tried to get US support, which they got along with that of UN members too. Eden was convinced that the Cyprus problem would only be resolved between the three countries; Britain, Greece and Turkey. Eden sent Field-Marshal Sir John Harding, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to Cyprus and he met with officials on the Island and with Makarios. Eden agreed with his colleagues on 20 October 1955, to make the following statement on behalf of her Majesty’s Government: “Self-determination can be applicable to Cyprus but not now...Her Majesty’s Government had offered a wide measure of self-government now...Her Majesty’s Government considers that the Greek and Turkish Governments should also be associated with these discussions by whatever method seems most appropriate.” Britain was very careful not to lose Turkish friendship and understanding —to keep Turkey’s confidence in Britain. The failure of this policy would separate Britain from the SWAC and inflame the Cyprus Question. Eden knew that the Cyprus Question would not settle until the importance of the Turkish position was understood and accepted. However, the Greeks, Americans and the UN did not understand or accept the Turkish position.

The problem solving continued despite differences among the parties. The US Consul, Mr Raymond Finley Courtney, helped Britain’s initiatives. The British, Americans, Greeks and Turks were willing to come to some kind of conclusion, but Makarios was unwilling and reluctant. EOKA continued to terrorise the Island. On 23 December 1955, Sir Charles Peake informed Her Majesty’s Government...
that there would not be a positive response from the Greek government to stop terrorism. Eden knew what Athens was doing: “...the Athens radio, under direct Government supervision, continued to do everything in its power to inflame the situation and to encourage acts of terrorism...”25 The Governor of the Island and Makarios continuously met from mid-December to the end of February 1956. Whatever the Governor offered, Makarios refused because, after consultations with terrorists, Makarios demanded more and raised new demands. The Colonial Secretary stated on 5 March in the House of Commons, “…I must confess with distress, that as soon as one obstacle is out of the way another one, unheard of until a week or two before, rears its head”. The Bishop of Kyrenia (Girne) was even more deeply implicated than Makarios with terrorist activities on the Island and both were expelled from Cyprus to the Seychelles from March 1956 to 15 March 1958.26 Eden informed a number of countries about the Cyprus issue and tried to get every possible support from them for the British cause.

Eden stated in his letter to President Eisenhower: “Though the Turks say less than the Greeks, it does not mean that they feel less, and their anxiety about their future has put them into a highly excitable state. They are violently determined against enosis. There is also a considerable population of Turkish-Cypriots in Turkey itself, which plays its part in moulding Turkish opinion. I believe they number a quarter of a million or more. If anything in the nature of widespread communal disturbances were to break out, this would put a heavy and most disagreeable task upon our forces which would have to try to keep the parties apart and restore order.”27 Eden understood Turkish opinion about Cyprus and he could not understand the lack of American interest in Turkish interests. Though he was told that the American government was well aware of the Turkish interest, the lack of Turkish lobby pressure in the US affected the Americans’ decision. Richard Nixon, then vice-president of the US, was informed about Turkish opinion on Cyprus by Adnan Menderes in Ankara: “The issue is not a government issue, rather it has become a national issue.” The US helped Britain at the UN in 1954 with the aim of preventing the destabilisation of NATO’s south-eastern flank. The Americans believed in solving the problem through bilateral negotiations. Lord Radcliffe’s plan for constitutional self-government28 and the possibility of partition were submitted to the Foreign Office on 12 November 1956 and, as announced on 19 December 1956, the Greeks rejected them while the Turks accepted enthusiastically.29 Eden wrote in his memoirs, “…in geography and in tactical considerations, the Turks have the stronger claim in Cyprus; in race and language, the Greeks, in strategy, the British, so long as their industrial life depends on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf...the problem could only be solved if Greeks and Turks would really come together and meet each others’ points of view.”30 At that time, there were two possibilities, according to Eden; the first was for the Greeks and Turks to be associated with the British in control of the Island and the second was partition, which became the official policy of the Menderes’ government at the time.31

The British used Turkish resistance to enosis in Cyprus to continue their policy of divide and rule.32 They knew that the Turkish Cypriots were determined to resist enosis at all costs. 1958 was the worst period of Greek terrorism, which was concentrated on the Turks, including civilians, rather than British soldiers. On 26 and 27 January 1958, when the Turkish Cypriots demonstrated against enosis, the British shot seven of them dead on the spot. One hundred people, Greeks and Turks, were killed by June 1958.33 The Cyprus issue was discussed on 22 February 1958 in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The agreed conclusion was taksim, which was known to be the British policy too, according to Lennox-Boyd’s declaration on 19 December 1957.34
When the tension was very high, the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, initiated a new move to solve the problem for the benefit of Britain. Macmillan already knew the strategic value of Cyprus had lessened with the failure of Suez. He was more anxious to get rid of Cyprus than was his predecessor, Anthony Eden. His first step was the release of the troublesome prelate, Makarios.35 Macmillan used the Makarios incident to favour British Policy on Cyprus, at the time and in following years.36

Turks and Greeks continued unchanged in their policy over Cyprus during the late 1950s, during which time various plans were proposed—the Radcliffe Proposal (December 1956), the Foot Plan (December 1957) and the Macmillan Plan (June 1958). The Macmillan Plan provided for a division of sovereignty between Britain, Greece and Turkey. Turkey accepted the plan while Greece did not. However, Britain announced it would implement the plan in 1958, granting self-government to Cyprus because continuing EOKA terrorism made the continuation of British rule difficult and expensive. In August 1958, Macmillan flew to Athens and Ankara and met with the Greek and Turkish prime ministers, Constantine Karamanlis and Adnan Menderes.37

Turkish Cabinet ministers met at Turkey’s presidential residence, Çankaya Köşkū, on 25 April 1957. In the meeting, Muharrem Nuri Birgi, the Turkish ambassador in London, stated that negotiations were continuing between Turkish and the British officials and these had produced a kind of agreement on Cyprus.38 After 18 months of serious work, both communities participated fully and equally in the Cyprus Agreements. On 5-11 February 1959, an agreement about the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus was signed at Zurich and endorsed in London on 19 February 1959.

Fatin Rüştü Zorlu and Evangelos Averoff, the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Greece, met on 18 December 1958, in Paris. This enabled meetings on 5-11 February 1959 in Zurich and on 19 February 1959 in London, in which the parties concluded agreements over Cyprus. Macmillan, Menderes and Karamanlis, the Prime Ministers of Britain, Turkey and Greece, with the representatives of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Makarios and Dr Fazıl Küçük, signed the London and Zurich Agreements. According to the Agreements, Turkey, Greece and Britain were given the right to intervene together or alone to protect or reinstate the constitutional state of affairs on Cyprus if it was threatened or disturbed.39 Limited numbers of Turkish and Greek troops were stationed in the Island in accordance with these agreements: 650 men and officers from Turkey, who had arrived in Cyprus on the 16 May 1960, and 950 men and officers from Greece.40 However, the number of troops Britain could station on the Island was limitless. That meant the Island still belonged to Britain. The Turkish Grand National Assembly ratified the treaties on 4 March 1959 by a vote of 347 out of 487.41 The Under-secretary at the Colonial Office, Julian Amery, Macmillan’s son-in-law, negotiated with Makarios, flying backwards and forwards between Britain and Cyprus, and reached an agreement by July. Finally, Britain gave up her sovereignty over Cyprus while preserving the military bases on the Island. Menderes characterised Britain as a “peace loving country” because of its policy on Cyprus at the time of the agreements.42 The Republic of Cyprus was established on 16 August 1960 and the constitutional arrangements and treaties, including those that enabled the intervention of Greece, Turkey or Britain in support of the constitutional order, were recognised by the United Nations. The settlement precluded enosis and taksim while Britain retained two air bases, Akrotiri (Agratur) and Dhekelia (Dikelya), which were the main consideration of the British in negotiations.43 In addition to these air bases, the British could also use radar and other strategic instruments on the Island. The British officials made it clear that if the Cyprus Republic decided to
become a member of the English-speaking countries, the Commonwealth countries, they would be free to do so. Consequently, Britain showed how democratic, liberal and peace loving a country she was while preserving her full rights over the Island, which was also accepted and ratified by the other parties (!).45

CONCLUSION

The First President of Cyprus was a Greek, the Vice-President Turkish and a proportion of seven Greeks to three Turks in the Island government. The Greeks controlled most of the important governmental positions, which led them to dominate the trade and the economy of the Island. The worst lands and locations on the Island were left to the Turks. The difficult marriage between the Greeks and Turks started with agony and high hopes. However, the agreements brought peace to the East Mediterranean, lifted disagreements within the southern flank of NATO, brought peace to the Island, ended the terrorism and re-established Greco-Turkish relations. Britain successfully dealt with the Cyprus Problem, according to its desired policy. This difficult marriage created its own industry and its own rights. The main benefactor of the problem was, of all parties, in fact, Britain. The Island was left, with the exception of sovereign air bases that would be used to safeguard British essential and vital strategic considerations in the region. Once again, “Britain hit the point over her actual weight in international politics” as British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, many years later, was to state.49

2 Henry Lennox D’Aubigne, Statement on Cyprus by the Minister of State for Colonial Affairs, 28th July 1954.
5 Alparslan Türkçez, Diş Politikamız ve Kıbrıs, İstanbul: Hamle, 1996, pp. 115-16.
10 Turkey instigated the creation of the Balkan Pact on 9 August 1954 as a peace-loving country.
14 Eden, op. cit., p. 396.
16 The relations were established particularly through higher education using universities, as experienced in India towards the end of the 1940s. See Halil Erdemir, ‘İngilizce Modern Bir Sömürge Vasıtası mı?’, Türk Yurdu Dergisi, July 2001, Cilt 21, Sayı 167, pp. 4-6.
19 Eden, op. cit., pp. 397-98.
20 Eden, op. cit., p. 399.
27 Eden, op. cit., p. 414.
28 This provided for internal autonomy with a legislative assembly composed of both Greeks and Turks. Macmillan, op. cit., p. 224.
30 Eden, op. cit., p. 415.
31 Armaoğlu, op. cit., pp. 532-33.
35 Makarios was invited to New York by Major Averel Harriman, which brought a reaction from Turkish public opinion. Burçak, op. cit., p. 445; Horne, op. cit., pp. 15, 36-7.
37 Macmillan, op. cit., pp. 674-86.
38 The Turkish officials in London were Muharrem Nuri Birgi, Melih Esenbel and Mahmut Dikerdem. Burçak, op. cit., p. 445.
44 Britain wanted to continue her domination of her former colonies. British officials used every possibility for the realisation of British influence and interests in all part of world. The Commonwealth was designed for this policy.
46 The Archbishop of Cyprus, Makarios, made it absolutely clear his unchanged intention for Cyprus throughout years, before, during and after his Presidency in the office. He stated this on three different occasions. First on 20 October 1950; “I take the holy oath that I shall work for the birth of our national freedom and shall never waiver from our policy of uniting Cyprus with Mother Greece”.
Than again on 13 December 1959, “For the first time in eight centuries the government of the island passes into Greek hands”. Finally on 14 March 1971; “Cyprus is Greek. Cyprus was Greek since the dawn of history and will remain Greek. Greek and undivided we have taken it over. Greek and undivided we shall preserve it. Greek and undivided we shall deliver it to Greece”.
48 TBMM Zabit Ceridesi, Dönem 11, İçtima 1, Cilt 7/3, 28 February 1959, p. 1354-55.