

War plans against Iraq aggravate conflict over Cyprus

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24 January 2003

During the past weeks, tens of thousands of Turkish Cypriots have demonstrated for reunification with the Greek part of the island and for accession to the European Union (EU). These mass demonstrations were directed against Rauf Denktash, the president of the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (TRNC), who has blocked the proposals by the United Nations (UN) to end the division of the island. Only Turkey recognizes the TRNC.

Last week’s demonstration was attended by 50,000 to 70,000 people, which is about one third of the population living in the Turkish part of the island. A counter-demonstration in support of Denktash drew no more than 300 participants.

These figures underscore the fact that Turkish nationalism, which dominated the North of the country for nearly 30 years, has lost almost all support.

The division of Cyprus began with the invasion of Turkish troops in 1974. One third of the population—Greeks as well as Turks—were forced to leave their homes. The island, where a Greek majority and a Turkish minority had previously coexisted peacefully, was divided up into two separate “ethnically cleansed” areas.

The Turkish invasion took place in reaction to a coup by fanatical Greek nationalists. With the support of the military junta governing in Athens, they had overthrown President Makarios, a moderate Greek nationalist, and replaced him with the notorious terrorist Nicos Sampson.

Since the Turkish invasion, the issue of Cyprus has served right-wing politicians and military officers in both Athens and Ankara as a welcome pretext to whip up nationalist sentiments. However, economic developments have undermined the influence of this type of nationalism. The recent demonstrations are an expression of social discontent that has accumulated over a long period.

Despite the fact that the Turkish part of Cyprus encompasses about one third of the island, including two thirds of all arable land, the difference in living standards between the internationally recognized Greek South and the internationally ostracized Turkish North has continually widened to the latter’s disadvantage. In the South, average income per capita is three times as high as in the North. Since the 1970s, more than 10,000 Turkish Cypriots have left the North. In the past,

right-wing settlers from the Turkish mainland took their place. Many Turkish workers are crossing the Greek border every day, in order to earn some money in Southern Cyprus. While the economy in the South experienced a boom due to international subsidies and tourism, all that boomed in the North was inflation and money laundering, and the Turkish population sank into poverty.

The recent decision by the European Union to accept (Southern) Cyprus as a new member threatens to deepen the social divide between the two parts of the island.

Resistance by the Turkish military

After its election victory in Turkey last November, the AKP (Party for Justice and Development) led by Recep Tayip Erdogan promised a new policy. The Cyprus conflict was to be resolved in order to hasten negotiations on Turkey’s own accession to the EU. In December, the EU decided to accept Cyprus as a full member in 2004, and the UN presented a new plan to overcome the division of the island.

However, Denktash, with the support of the Turkish army leadership, has since blocked this plan. While the Turkish population of Cyprus is protesting against Denktash in the streets, and Erdogan has been warning that the will of the people must not be ignored, high-ranking military figures came out with several statements in the Turkish media declaring that the UN plan for Cyprus posed a threat to Turkey’s security interests.

The Turkish military is clinging to Northern Cyprus for ideological, economic and strategic reasons.

Ideologically, they justify their extraordinary power within the state by claiming that they uphold the heritage of the founder of the Turkish state, Kemal Atatürk. Any retreat in relation to Cyprus would deal a heavy blow to this nationalist myth.

Economically, the occupation and division of the island creates a lucrative source of income for members of the military as well as for the criminal fascist gangs, the Gray Wolves, which constitute a key pillar of Denktash’s regime. It has been an open secret for a long time that the money laundered in the numerous banks and casinos in Northern Cyprus comes from drug dealing and is used to finance the dirty war against the Kurdish minority in Turkey.

Following the de facto capitulation of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the PKK, even sections of the military regard the mafia structures that developed within the army during the 15 years of war against the Kurds as an obstacle to Turkey's economic development. Still, the strategic importance of Cyprus has gained even greater significance for them.

At present, Northern Cyprus is a virtual military protectorate, inhabited by 200,000 civilians and 35,000 soldiers. The troops sent over from the Turkish mainland control most of the public administration, including the police and the fire brigades. The island is the largest military base in the eastern Mediterranean Ocean. The oil pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan—construction of which has just begun—will end just opposite of Cyprus on the Turkish Mediterranean coast. In addition, Cyprus is situated on the sea route between Turkey and her ally Israel (while the land route passes through Syria).

The role of the US

The Turkish military leaders feel strengthened by the US war plans. Turkey is to serve as an important base for the war against Iraq. Washington demands that Ankara permit the deployment of large military units that will form a northern front against Iraq. Media reports have spoken of the Pentagon stationing 80,000 US soldiers in Turkey as well as its use of eight Turkish air bases and three civilian ports.

So far, the AKP government has been hesitant about fully complying with these requests. While the Turkish government depends on the US for cash and credits, it still fears the reaction of the public. According to recent polls, 80 to 90 per cent of Turks are opposed to a war against their neighboring country.

This is why the US government is turning more and more directly to the Turkish military. On Monday, US Chief of Staff Richard Myers visited Ankara for a two-hour talk with his Turkish counterpart, Hilmi Özkök. Afterwards, he praised the close strategic collaboration between the two nations.

For public consumption, the army leadership is leaving the decision on Turkey's position regarding the war to the government. According to a report by the American press agency UPI, however, they are proceeding quite differently behind the scenes: "Özkök has just held his own tricky meeting with Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, and reports from sources close to the military tell UPI the general informed the premier that 'news reports about "indecision" regarding the Iraq issue had upset the Turkish armed forces.' The Turkish generals are keen to support the United States, claiming that since Washington has clearly decided to go ahead, Turkey had better be on the winning side to ensure that it has a major voice in post-war decisions on the future of Iraq and the role of the Kurds."

In the *New York Times* of 16 January 2003, columnist William Safire was most explicit in spelling out Washington's attitude towards Turkey, a stance marked by cynicism and imperialist arrogance. Having praised Turkey as a long-standing reliable ally of the US, Safire complained that "...the

growth of democracy in Turkey... has introduced an element of uncertainty in that alliance. The new, freely elected government in Ankara, with roots more Islamic than secular, is waffling about joining President Bush's 'coalition of the willing' against Iraq. The old Turkish power structure—the nation's military leadership and governmental establishment, which previously called the shots—is laying back to show Europeans how sensitive to public opinion Turkey has become."

He then proceeded to tell the Turkish government in no uncertain terms what was required if it wanted "an unwavering superpower on its side for decades to come ... What should Turkey's new leaders do? First, make prompt parliamentary and construction arrangements to welcome the US troops. And then go the extra mile: Volunteer to mass 100,000 Turkish troops on its border with northern Iraq."

Meanwhile, the army leadership has stepped up its pressure on the AKP government. Early last week, General Özkök called a press conference and denounced the elected civilian government in a manner that left nobody in doubt as to the real power relationships in Turkey. He rejected any criticisms of the internal purges carried out by the army against suspected Islamists, vehemently opposed any loosening of the ban on headscarves in public buildings and then proceeded to address the main issue: Cyprus, he said, was of essential importance for Turkey's ability to avert possible dangers.

The General's warning was promptly heeded. A few days later, the foreign ministry stated that Turkey's policy towards Cyprus remained "unchanged" and that any solution would have to take into account the "sovereign equality" of both states; i.e., the recognition of Northern Cyprus as an independent state. Turkey's Prime Minister Gül came out explicitly in support of "President" Denktash. Turkey, he said, would continue to back him under all circumstances. The Turkish government now suddenly attributed the demonstrations of the Turkish Cypriots to provocations and Greek money. The government declared the UN plan unacceptable to Turkey.

As far as Turkish support for the Iraq war is concerned, the AKP government officially gave the US green light to have Turkey's military bases inspected by a team of 150 specialists. In return, the US Export Import Bank provided Turkey with a credit for the purchase of 14 American military helicopters.

Knowing that the US needs them for the war against Iraq, the Turkish military feel strengthened in their uncompromising position towards Cyprus.



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