



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Cyprus: Managing Ethnic Conflict Through Geographic Partitioning

Michael L. Grumelli, PhD

Discussion. The painful history of Cyprus in the second half of the 20th Century can serve as both a case study in war causation involving ethno-nationalism and as a conflict resolution strategy involving communal division as well as United Nations (UN) intervention. It offers for consideration in the current situation in Iraq a conflict resolution or Phase IV Stability Operations model centered on a partitioning of the target country.

The 1974 Turkish invasion of northern Cyprus capped a ten year period of escalating inter-communal violence between the Greek-Cypriot majority and the island's Turkish minority. The past 30 years has witnessed a political and military impasse that allowed the ethno-nationalistic causes of the conflict to remain unaddressed, however, it has limited the violence between the Greek and Turkish communities on the island. The centerpiece of this impasse is the 180-kilometer long United Nations supervised cease-fire "Green Line," initially established in 1964, which divided the island's population along ethnic lines.

In a region marked by inter-communal violence it is possible to view the long-standing stalemate on Cyprus as a problem under control. This sense of partial resolution rests to a great degree on the fact that Cyprus was spared the problem of refugee populations languishing in the squalor of massive tent cities. Turkish refugees who fled to the north were housed through the sequestration of Greek Cypriot homes. The Greek Cypriot refugees that had been forcibly displaced by the Turkish invasion were rapidly housed through a massive construction program in the south. This effort and the military standoff along the Green Line allowed the international community to view Cyprus during the past 30 years as a low-level political and humanitarian problem.

Although the partition of the Island of Cyprus along ethnic lines reduced the incidence of violence, it also proved to be a sterile solution to the island's underlying ethno-nationalistic conflict. The unnatural division and continuing dislocation of ordinary discourse between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots engendered the coming to maturity of a generation of Greek and Turkish Cypriots completely unknown to each other. Moreover, the ongoing division of Cyprus has frustrated attempts to bring like-minded citizens from both ethnic communities together to secure a political solution to the problem. Recourse to basic confidence building measures as part of a conflict resolution or Phase IV strategy is not feasible in an environment dominated by a green line.

The UN can point to a series of genuine attempts to resolve the island's inter-communal conflict. However, the parties have made little progress toward reunifying Cyprus with a constitutional arrangement that guaranteeing the rights of all Cypriots. This problem is further exacerbated by the inability of the divided Greek and Turkish communities to recognize that the future health, prosperity and success of the island, including the possibility of inclusion in the European Union, depends on the contributions of both ethnic groups.

Attempts to reunify the island by inducing the two sides to live and govern together via a bi-zonal, bi-communal, federation have failed simply because neither community is willing to make the concession necessary to resolve the conflict. Although in recent years the definition of territorial size of the two potential federated states has been resolved, the collective and individual security of both communities as well as de-militarization has proven intractable. Partition of the island has also resulted in additional obstacles to a federated solution. Among the more serious of these obstacles are: (1) returning displaced persons to their former homes, especially the traditionally Greek Cypriot town of Morphou; (2) reopening the abandoned city of Famagusta, which was once the center of the island's tourist industry, to both Greek and Turkish settlement; and (3) reinstatement of a single currency for the island.

The persistence of the informal partition of the island has turned Cyprus into one of the more heavily militarized countries in the world. In addition, a partitioned Cyprus remains a continuing irritant in the troubled relations between Greece and Turkey. It also leaves the island as a potential flash point for military conflict in the already turbulent eastern Mediterranean.

In the case of Cyprus, a green line solution to inter-communal conflict can provide a stopgap measure as part of a conflict resolution or Phase IV Stability Operations strategy under certain conditions. The first of these is a reshuffling of the population into clearly defined, defensible, homogenous, geographic communities. Second on the list is a refugee housing solution that is not dependent on massive, long-term, tent cities. The final element in the mix is a third-party peacekeeping presence to monitor the demilitarized zone, along with the deterring presence of protective external state powers for each community (Greece and Turkey). However, the 30-year informal partition of Cyprus reveals the fundamental problem with green line dominated conflict resolution strategies. Should the green line harden into a defacto border, as in the case of Cyprus, it will become another major obstacle to all other inter-communal conflict resolution strategies aside from, perhaps, formal separation into two internationally recognized nation-states.