

March 7, 2003

CYPRUS: TURKEY'S OTHER DIFFICULT DECISION

Overshadowed by the surprising failure on March 1 of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) to permit the deployment of American forces to open a northern front through Turkey in the likely war with Iraq, and the resulting strains in the US-Turkish relationship, the Cyprus issue has also reached a diplomatic climax. On March 4-5, the Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktas, who has been under increasing pressure from United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, came to Ankara seeking support. Proclaiming himself satisfied with his talks with Turkish leaders, Denktas now heads into a crucial meeting at The Hague on March 10 with Annan and newly elected Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos. The governing Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been promoting a settlement of the Cyprus problem, now faces the prospect of the collapse of the UN-sponsored efforts as well as additional complications in Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU). However, despite JDP Chairman Recep Tayyip Erdogan's complaints about the difficulties of dealing with the Iraq and Cyprus issues at the same time, he cannot avoid the urgent decisions that will redefine Turkish foreign policy.

On February 27, Annan presented the Cypriot leaders the third and apparently final version of his peace plan at a meeting in Nicosia. The original plan was submitted on November 11, a week after the Turkish elections, and revised on December 10, just before the EU summit meeting at Copenhagen. Annan informed the leaders that he was willing to extend his February 28 deadline while demanding that the two sides commit themselves to a referendum on the plan and EU membership on March 30 at their Hague meeting. However, the two sides have not shown any sign of moving towards a compromise. Despite Turkish Cypriot demonstrations in favor of a settlement, Denktas rejected all three versions of the plan, denounced Annan for trying to bypass him through a plebiscite, and apparently intends to seek further revisions in the plan. Meanwhile, Papadopoulos has been trying to tone down his earlier negative comments about the peace plan, but it is apparent that he is also unhappy with Annan's gambit.

Fully recognizing the insurmountable difficulties of achieving an agreement through the decades-old intercommunal negotiations, Annan has deliberately broadened the effort. Prior to his arrival in Nicosia, Annan visited Ankara and Athens to ask the "motherlands" of the two Cypriot communities to help in finally sealing a deal. While the Greek government faces difficulties in urging the new Greek Cypriot leadership to accept a deal, the JDP government confronts an even more difficult task. To begin with, although its stunning victory in the November 3 elections led to the formation of Turkey's first single-party government in over a decade, the JDP has yet to establish full control. Erdogan's inability to immediately assume the post of prime minister effectively impeded the exercise of the JDP's electoral mandate. There was inevitably a lack of coordination between Prime Minister Abdullah Gul's constitutional powers and the political power effectively retained by Erdogan. The problem will not be resolved until the formation of a new government headed by Erdogan after his expected victory in the Siirt by-elections on March 9.

Moreover, the duality at the apex of the JDP inevitably enhanced the ability of the bureaucratic and military establishment to proscribe the new government's freedom of action. While entrenched elements within the Turkish state always test the resolve of new governments in an endeavor to protect their power base, their current resistance has been of a more pronounced nature because of their lingering suspicions relating to the Islamist background of the JDP. The problem has been compounded by the failure of the JDP to bring in its own bureaucrats as well as the foreign policy challenges that effectively monopolized its time and energy. However, governments have to govern and the JDP's actions on Cyprus will demonstrate its ability to exercise its electoral mandate.

TURKEY, CYPRUS AND THE EU

The significance of Cyprus for the JDP is a product not only of its historic importance as a "national cause," but also of the linkage between the resolution of the problem and the Turkish effort to join the EU. In contrast to the Islamist Welfare Party, which showed little interest in Europe during its 1996-97 stint in government, the JDP government immediately focused on Turkey's application to the EU as its first priority. After quickly passing two legislative packages of reforms in compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, Erdogan visited 14 of the 15 EU capitals and used his December 2002 visit to Washington, where he met President Bush, to seek US support for EU membership. However, despite the intense Turkish efforts, the Copenhagen Summit on December 12-13 was a disappointment. While the EU committed itself only to reviewing Turkey's candidacy in December 2004, it extended an invitation to 10 other applicants, including the Greek Cypriots on behalf of the entire island. Nevertheless, the JDP government chose to respond positively by pledging to complete the necessary political reforms by the end of 2003. Even more significantly, it reiterated its willingness to support the achievement of a Cyprus settlement by February 28. However, the Turkish bargaining position had been undermined by the failure to strike a Cyprus deal before Copenhagen. In fact, after Copenhagen, Cyprus increasingly began to loom as a potentially insurmountable obstacle to Turkey's dream of integration with Europe. On March 4, Guenther Verheugen, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, bluntly stated, "if Cyprus settlement efforts failed, it would be very difficult to start accession talks with Turkey."

After the summit, Erdogan pointedly declared that he was "not in favor of following the Cyprus policy that has been followed for the last 30 or 40 years. This is not Mr. Denktas' personal business." At the same time, the JDP government refrained from implementing the previously proclaimed threat to "integrate" with northern Cyprus "immediately" if the Greek Cypriots were accepted into the EU. However, the JDP has been unable to force through additional changes to the Cyprus policy due to the determined opposition of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the Turkish military establishment and foreign ministry bureaucrats. After a meeting on December 18, attended by Denktas as well as Gul and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hilmi Ozkok, Sezer declared that "Turkey's position on Cyprus was not subject to seasonal change" while Ozkok said that criticizing Denktas would "only erode the Turkish position." A few days later, Ozkok stated that if the Annan plan were accepted "Turkey would be locked into Anatolia" and then sent his Land Forces Commander Aytac Yalman to Cyprus in a major show of support for Denktas. Clearly emboldened, Denktas personally criticized Erdogan and said that he would not sign the peace plan even if the majority of the Turkish Cypriots accepted it. Obviously, Denktas was relying on his traditional backers in Ankara to trump the pro-plan Turkish Cypriots as well as Erdogan and the JDP. Although his meeting with Erdogan on March 6 revealed fundamental differences, as Erdogan publicly confirmed, his subsequent summit meeting with Sezer, Gul and Ozkok, as well as his warm reception at the TGNA, confirmed to Denktas' satisfaction that he has been able to retain Turkish support.

DECISION TIME

The JDP government has been shying away from a potentially bruising confrontation with Denktas and his powerful supporters in Ankara who have opposed the concessions envisioned by the UN plan. In any case, the JDP was ill-prepared for such a major trial of strength in view of the reported differences on Cyprus between Erdogan and Gul, not to mention the uncompromisingly hard-line stance of TGNA Speaker Bulent Arinc. However, the Cyprus showdown may have been merely postponed. With the UN talks heading towards an impasse that will clear the way for the Greek Cypriots to sign the accession document for EU membership for Cyprus on April 16 on their own, Erdogan may ultimately decide that the likely short-term domestic costs of a confrontation in Ankara on the Cyprus issue are outweighed by the long-term costs on the international stage. He could also recognize the Cyprus issue as a crucial test of the JDP's ability to govern effectively. Just as with the Iraq issue, however, Erdogan may have only a few days to decide once he becomes prime minister.

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