Topic 4:   Regional conflicts

Teaching and learning aids

Actual centers of conflict

The Cyprus conflict as mirrored in the various interests in the eastern Mediterranean

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The British colonial period 1878-1960

In its more recent history Cyprus remained under foreign rule until its independence in 1960.This had above all to do with its strategically important position in the eastern Mediterranean, which for the Cypriots was mostly a curse and seldom a blessing. When the island fell under the rule of Great Britain in 1878, too, strategic considerations were responsible. Lying as it did on the British "lifeline", the sea route to the most important crown colony of India, control over the island was of the greatest significance. Originally thought of as an important military basis, the island soon lost its importance again, as Great Britain took over control of the Suez Canal in 1882 and set up military bases in Egypt, where, in contrast to Cyprus, Alexandria provided suitable port facilities for the British fleet. From then on, the importance of Cyprus to Great Britain lay for decades in the fact that the third largest island in the Mediterranean should in no circumstances be allowed to fall into the hands of others, although Great Britain itself had little use for it other than to exploit it economically in the worst possible way through taxes for five decades.

Finally annexed by London at the beginning of the First World War, it did not play an important role either in the First or in the Second World War. But after 1945 there was an escalation of tensions between the colonial power and the Greek-Orthodox majority population. This was the beginning of what, after several metamorphoses, still occupies the world community today as the "Cyprus problem".

The roots of this conflict go back to the beginning of British colonial rule. With Great Britain the island had come under the control of a country which geographically was not part of the region and therefore would not rule Cyprus for ever. The roughly 80% of the population formed by the Greek-Orthodox majority population expected unification of the island with Greece to follow after the end of the British colonial period.

Such unification, however, was never acceptable for the less than 20% Turkish-Cypriot minority population, seeing that Greece had always been the arch-enemy of the Ottoman Empire, or, after 1923, of Turkey. Right from the start the Turkish leadership of the island put up a determined opposition to the desire for unification expressed again and again by the Greek-Cypriots.

 In the 1920's the conflict had already begun to deteriorate when some of the Greek-Cypriot leadership started on a course of confrontation with the British colonial power and this culminated in a short-lived,unsuccessful rebellion. The rebellion resulted in the end of the relatively liberal British form of rule and not until the Second World War did the British relax their strict command and allow the Cypriot population to take part in politics again. At the end of the war the colonial masters found themselves confronted with the expectation which they themselves had stirred up of now being permitted "enosis" or unification with their Greek "mother country".

But London had other plans for Cyprus. It quickly became clear that the former world power of Great Britain would concentrate on the Near and Middle East as a power to establish order. And in this strategic new orientation Cyprus played a central role. While many colonies were moving towards independence, Cyprus was declared to be a strategic colony for which there could be no question of an end to British rule. Instead, the Cypriots were offered far-reaching self-government under British sovereignty.

At the same time as a result of the Greek civil war (1946-1949) the split in the Greek Cypriot population had deepened into a left and a right camp, whose leaders carried on an embittered power struggle. Driven on by the British refusal ever to concede independence to the island and by the internal power struggle, in which both sides claimed leadership in the question of enosis, the situation escalated over political claims to Cyprus under the leadership of the charismatic Archbishop Makarios III. On the one hand he forced the government in Athens to take the Cyprus question to the United Nations in 1954, on the other hand the underground EOKA organization began its armed struggle against the British in 1955.

London reacted to making the Cyprus question an international matter and to the EOKA struggle by building up Turkey to become the strategic opponent to the Greek side. A continuation of its own colonial rule was to be presented to the world community as the only possible way to prevent civil war in Cyprus and war over the island between Greece and Turkey.

Ankara in its turn did not need much bidding when invited to show greater interest in the island. Since Cyprus is only 65 Km. from the southern coast of Turkey, the idea that Cyprus could fall into the hands of the arch-enemy Greece had always been a nightmare for the Turkish military and the political élite. In addition, the fate of the Turkish-Cypriot minority, which identified itself with Turkey as its "mother country", could not be a matter of indifference to any Turkish government. At the United Nations Ankara gave a historical explanation for its claim that the island should fall to Turkey at the end of the British colonial period, including the more than three-hundred-year Ottoman rule over the island before 1878. The island, they said, was moreover a geographical continuation of and thus part of the Anatolian peninsula.

During the EOKA fighting, which lasted nearly five years, the framework conditions changed decisively. In 1957 Great Britain decided on a new orientation of its security policy and thus of its Cyprus policy. As a nuclear power London was now prepared to give up its rule over the whole of Cyprus. The price was two sovereign military bases in Cyprus and various military facilities. At the same time, though, London no longer had the political situation under control. In 1956 the British government had conceded to the Turkish-Cypriot minority their own right to self-determination in order to come to meet the Greek-Cypriot demands for self-determination and to establish the continuation of their colonial rule as the only alternative to partition of the island.

But the Turkish side had since been working on partition of the island, whose northern half Ankara wanted to annexe in order to secure strategic control over the island. The southern part was then to be unified with Greece in compensation. Partition of the island, in which both populations lived mingled together, was completely unacceptable to the Greek side, which considered itself to be the legitimate rulers with its 80% majority population and did not acknowledge more than a privileged minority status for the Turkish-Cypriots. As a result tensions escalated in Cyprus between the two populations, culminating in 1957 and above all in 1958 in clashes which resembled civil war, from which their relationship would never again recover.

Surprisingly, but probably above all due to the alliances formed in the UNO and the deteriorating regional security situation in the Middle East, in 1959 a compromise was reached that none of the conflicting parties had really wanted: the island's independence. The Turkish-Cypriot side would be anchored as a second national group of politically almost equal standing in a complex political system

that would concede them far-reaching privileges and rights of veto. Great Britain, Greece and Turkey became guarantors of the constitution, which also excluded unification of the island with Greece or Turkey. The British received their sovereign military bases and military facilities, while Greece and Turkey were allowed to station respectively 950 and 650 soldiers on the island.

The Cyprus conflict from independence to partition of the island, 1960-1974

In 1963, only three years after independence, constitutional order collapsed when the Greek-Cypriot leadership under President and Archbishop Makarios tried to introduce a change in the constitution that would extensively deprive the Turkish-Cypriot population politically of their newly won rights and privileges and reduce them to minority status.The Turkish-Cypriot leadership was not entirely innocent in this development, having obstinately blocked Greek attempts to solve controversial questions along Greek-Cypriot lines, although there were among other things practicable laws for both sides. In particular the problem areas were the following: the Turkish-Cypriot demand to retain separate town administrations, the introduction of a joint army, or a 30% job guarantee for Turkish-Cypriots in the civil service. Moreover the second in command of the Turkish-Cypriots, Rauf Denktash, who rightly did not trust the Greek-Cypriots, had missed no opportunity to continue his policy directed at partition of the island and to strengthen tensions between the two national groups.

In 1964 civil war broke out again, causing more than 500 victims. Thousands of Turkish-Cypriots fled from Greek-Cypriot attacks to enclaves which formed only about 3% of the island's territory, but in which almost half of all Turkish-Cypriots were housed in sometimes wretched living-conditions. The enclaves were surrounded by Greek-Cypriot and shortly after by thousands of mainland Greek troops who had been rushed into the island. Since the end of 1963 there have been no more Turkish-Cypriots in the government or the administration, while the now exclusively Greek-Cypriot government has remained recognized by the international community until today as the only government of the Republic of Cyprus. On the other hand the Turkish-Cypriot leadership hoped in vain for an invasion by Turkey to make their dream of partition of the island come true by force. For this reason, too, they refused all attempts to integrate them back into the government system in 1964 and built up their own administrative structures inside the enclaves, after the USA had thwarted a Turkish invasion attempt in 1964.

Once again events in Cyprus – very much to the anger of the USA and Great Britain – almost led to war between the Nato member-states of Turkey and Greece. Attempts by the USA and Great Britain to send peace-keeping troops from member-states of Nato or commonwealth countries to Cyprus failed, thanks also to the resistance of the Greek-Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios. He was dependent in internal politics on the support of the strong communist party of Cyprus (AKEL) and pursued a neutralistic foreign policy that was a thorn in the flesh above all of the USA. Because of this as well Makarios did not at first want any peace-keeping troops at all in the country, but hoped to be able to solve the problems himself according to his own ideas. The compromise solution in the end was to send the UNFICYP (United Nations Force in Cyprus), a UNO peace-keeping force that has been stationed in the island since 1964.

The tension-ridden status quo in the island, that led, to be sure, only in isolated incidents to conflicts after 1964, lasted until 1967. In Greece a military junta had seized power and so tensions rose again in the island. When in 1967 a local conflict over a Turkish-Cypriot enclave escalated and led to a Greek-Cypriot attack there, Turkey once more started preparations for invasion and delivered an ultimatum. Under massive pressure from the USA the junta and the Greek-Cypriot government yielded. Most of the Greek soldiers were withdrawn, the supreme commender of the Greek and Greek-Cypriot forces, the former EOKA leader, General George Grivas, had to leave the island.

After 1967 the situation in the island changed. Makarios found himself increasingly in conflict with the junta in Greece. Under Makarios' leadership many Greek-Cypriots came to realize that they should no longer strive towards unification of the island with Greece, but construct a functioning Cypriot community where Turkish-Cypriots would receive privileged minority status. Negotiations began between the two national groups and the last remains of the economic embargo that the Greek-Cypriots

had imposed on the enclaves were suspended. Nevertheless it was not possible to reach agreement until 1974, although Greece and Turkey intervened in the negotiations and USA and Great Britain let it be known that they would consent to any agreement between the two sides.

Parallel to the negotiations the atmosphere between Makarios and the Greek military junta continued to worsen. Grivas returned to the island in 1971 and took over the leadership of EOKA B, an underground organization that set itself the target of toppling Makarios and achieving unification with Greece.

The bloody conflict within the Greek-Cypriot national group together with the differences between Makarios and the Greek junta culminated in a coup d'état on 15th. July, 1974. Makarios survived and was able to flee from the island. But the coup d'état by enosis supporters and the nomination of Nicos Sampson, known as the "killer of Turks", as President of the state by the Greek and Greek-Cypriot putsch ringleaders was a grave provocation for Turkey, which was only waiting for an opportunity to solve the Cyprus conflict according to its own ideas.

Recalling their status as guarantors, Turkish troops landed in the north of the island on 20th. July. Only two days later a truce was called and the conflicting parties started negotiations in Geneva. On 23rd. July the military junta in Athens was overthrown and the putsch against Makarios collapsed. Although the actual cause for the Turkish intervention had been removed, on 14th. August Ankara ordered the continuation of military operations.It was now clear that Turkey was not carrying out any intervention to reinstate the constitutional order of 1960, but was abusing its right to intervention in order to aim for partition of the island. Within three days Turkish troops had occupied 36.3% of the island territory and another 3.7% was declared a neutral zone under UN control after the invasion. In its advance the Turkish army drove out the Greek-Cypriot population with brutal force. Thousands died and some 160,000 Greek-Cypriots became permanent refugees, who would not see their houses again for decades. Some of the Greek-Cypriots retaliated with bloody excesses against the Turkish-Cypriots, causing many to flee to the two British military bases. An exchange of population in 1975 concluded the process of ethnic separation of the two national groups , which still is in force today.

Cyprus - after partition and before reunification? 1974-2005

In 1977 and 1979 the conflicting parties agreed on the outlines for a future solution to the Cyprus problem. The island was to be reunified on the basis of a two-community, two-zone federation. For nearly three decades this was the only really substantial progress in the Cyprus question, although the United Nations and their General Secretaries had always made great efforts towards a solution. In 1983 the northern part of the island which was led by Rauf Denktash declared its independence, but the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" has still today only been recognized by Turkey, which in any case exercises de facto control over the north and has over 30,000 troops stationed there permanently. At the same time Turks from the mainland were systematically settled there, while many Turkish-Cypriots left the north, which was isolated and later put under an economic embargo. For Turkey and Rauf Denktash the Cyprus problem was solved by this partition. For years one could count on the fact that the Turkish side would negotiate for the sake of negotiation but never consent to an agreement, while the Greek-Cypriot negotiators mostly – but not always – made serious efforts towards a solution. And so the Cyprus problem became a forgotten conflict that only developed new dynamics with the start of membership negotiations between the Greek-Cypriot Republic of Cyprus and the EU.

In 1998 negotiations to join the EU began with the Greek-Cypriot government of the Republic of Cyprus, which in the eyes of the international community represents the whole of Cyprus. For Turkey's EU ambitions this was a harsh setback. From now on it was clear that a solution of the Cyprus problem must be found if Turkey really wanted to join the EU. At the same time a reluctant European Union had taken on the Cyprus problem under Greek pressure and was now hectically busy trying to arrive at a solution before membership was given to the island. Intense negotiations began under the guidance of the UN General secretary Kofi Annan, who was supported by the USA, Great Britain and the EU. For the first

time a comprehensive plan was to be worked out for a solution that would settle all aspects of the Cyprus question.

In 2002 there began to take place on the Turkish side political transformations which shattered the traditional certainty over the intransigent attitude of Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot leadership. In 2002 and 2003 there were mass demonstrations against Denktash, whose status quo political orientation was no longer shared by the vast majority of Turkish-Cypriots. Frustrated by their own isolation, the miserable economic situation, being led by the nose by Turkey but above all encouraged by the prospect of themselves joining the EU in the eventuality of a solution to the Cyprus conflict, the Turkish-Cypriots turned away from their inflexible leader and towards reunification of the island.

As a result of the tense situation Denktash then changed his line of action and in April, 2003 to everyone's complete surprise opened the "Green line" that had divided both ethnic groups from one another since December, 1963. For the first time since 1974 both groups of Cypriots were able to visit the other part of the island. Just as surprisingly and encouragingly there have so far been no incidents finding a solution, worth mentioning. In December,2003 the solution-seeking opposition politician Mehment Ali Talat won the Parliamentary elections and soon after took Denktash's place as chief negotiator for the Turkish-Cypriots. This change in the leadership in the north, which was politically and economically completely dependent on Turkey, had been made possible by a change of policy in Ankara.

The government elected around Recep Tayip Erdogan in 2002 had made it clear soon after taking over the reins of government that in contrast to their predecessors they would make serious efforts to find a solution to the Cyprus problem, the biggest stumbling-block on Turkey's way to the EU.

Ironically the political trend on the Greek-Cypriot side went in the opposite direction. At the beginning of 2003 the moderate, solution-seeking President of the Republic of Cyprus, Glafkos Clerides, had lost the presidency elections to Tassos Papadopoulos, considered a hardliner. This was one of the first signs that consent of the Greek-Cypriots to a solution of the Cyprus problem on the basis of the UN proposals would not be so much a matter of course as the international community had expected. In February,2004 the negotiations came to a conclusion. Kofi Annan would be allowed to settle questions on which no agreement could be reached himself. The fifth version of the so-called Annan Plan was to be put before both national groups in a referendum to be held simultaneously a few days before entry of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU, in order to make membership for both parts of the island possible and to spare the EU the Cyprus problem.

While the Turkish government and Talat expressly canvassed for consent to the Annan Plan and the Greek government reacted relatively positively, Tassos Papadopoulos recommended refusal of the plan in an emotional television appeal. On 24th. April the Turkish-Cypriots as expected accepted the Annan Plan with 65% of the votes. It was with shock and great surprise that the rest of the world received news of the of the 76% "no"-votes on the Greek-Cypriot side. The best chance so far of overcoming the partition of the island had been missed. Fierce criticism rained down from most outside observers and politicians at the clear "no" of the Greeks in the island.

Even if this criticism was justified in many points, and if one blames Papadopoulos for continuing to aim for a Greek-dominated state and not acting constructively, many analysts have nevertheless overlooked the fact that the Annan Plan – on many points realistic, fair and brilliant - in certain essential parts, concerning above all security aspects was not the balanced document that its creators made it out to be. Turkey in particular in the final phase of the negotiations had succeeded in having its way in substantial as well as in highly symbolic questions.

The British, American and European UN diplomats thought that by conceding

- permanent presence of the Turkish army in the island
- Turkey's right to intervention

- citizenship for all settlers coming from the Turkish mainland

they would win the consent of Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots. They overlooked, however, the fact that these very concessions were unacceptable to the Greek-Cypriots or at least were felt to be so.

The problematical conduct of the negotiations by Papadopoulos, who - with the certainty of his own EU membership in the bag - was speculating like many of his compatriots on a more advantageous solution at a later date, no doubt played its part, too. Nevertheless, a sober analysis - which in the short and highly emotional phase before the referendum was hardly possible anyway - showed that as a Greek-Cypriot one did not need to be a hardliner or an opponent of a "realistic" solution to the Cyprus problem to turn down this plan. It is equally true that many of the reasons put forward by the opponents of the plan, just like the high percentage of "no"-votes, gave rise to doubts as to whether the majority of Greek-Cypriots are at all willing to consent to a future solution of the conflict, even if a new Annan Plan were more calibrated on some highly sensitive points.

On 1st. May,2004 then the whole of Cyprus formally, but de facto only the part under Greek control, became a member of the European Union. From this point in time at the very latest, the European Union has had a Cyprus problem that it will not be rid of until it is solved. The decision in October, 2005 to take up negotiations with Turkey on joining the EU with complete membership as its aim guaranteed that the Cyprus problem would be high on the agenda of many future EU summit meetings. The Greek-Cypriots will continue as full members with the right of veto to try to use the EU to force concessions from the membership candidate Turkey in the Cyprus question. Their aim is of course to arrive at a clearly more advantageous solution for themselves at the latest by the end of the process of Turkish membership in about 15 years.The latest disagreements on the recognition of the Republic of Cyprus by Turkey and free Greek-Cypriot access to Turkish ports and airports at the EU summits in September and October, 2005 are just a first foretaste of what is coming for the EU and the Turkish side. One can also look at it positively, though: the process of Turkey's membership raises the chances of a successful settlement of all conflicts that still smoulder between Greece and Turkey and of which the Cyprus problem is only one.

The prospect of membership for Ankara and the accompanying democratization of Turkey as well as of northern Cyprus, which until the Talat era suffered from similar democratic shortcomings, can only help towards a solution. At the same time, however, many Greek-Cypriots will have to go through a painful process of change if a future solution proposal , which in many points will not essentially differ from the Annan Plan, is to have a chance of consent among them. Still, one can at least dream of a lasting reconciliation between all the conflicting parties and so of a peaceful future for the region on the basis of the values and prosperity of the European Union. The chances have never been better, but this is no guarantee that Cyprus will not drive still further generations of international mediators to distraction.

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A map of Cyprus is included in the accompanying collection of materials.

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Translated from the original German by: Gillian Johnson