

Emerging Voices of Greek America: Cyprus

The following essays were written by three participants in the AHIF Student Foreign Policy Trip to Greece and Cyprus in summer of 2017. During the two-week program, the students were in Cyprus, Athens, and Crete. Prior to departing for overseas, the students spent three days in Washington, DC where they received firsthand experience about the foreign policy issues affecting Greece and Cyprus, their relations with the US, and the interests of the US in the region. The AHIF Foundation offers this program annually.

American Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean

Theofilos Koulianos

My participation in the AHIF foreign policy student trip to Greece marked my seventeenth trip to Greece, but it was an experience unlike any other because it gave me an entirely different perspective when it comes to viewing Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and Turkey. Current State Department policies act against United States' long-term interests by its continued failure to condemn Turkey's illegal intervention in the occupied area of the Republic of Cyprus, as well as the department's neglect to call out Turkey's continued violations of Greek airspace and exclusive economic zone of the Republic of Cyprus. The United States' long-term interest is to support stabilization in the increasingly unstable Eastern Mediterranean region. Greece and the Republic of Cyprus serve as pillars of such stability. Moreover, Turkey's continued actions of flights over Greek airspace and claims to Cyprus' exclusive economic zone are without question in violation of international law which the United States is expected to uphold. Turkey's illegal actions serve as destabilizing factors in the Eastern Mediterranean region, making it even more in the strategic interests of the United States to condemn Turkey's illegal actions.

A severe increase in the number of dogfights between Greek and Turkish fighter jets serves as a key statistic that highlights the destabilizing effects of Turkey's illegal actions. At the time of our trip to the Hellenic National Defense General Staff, seventy-one dog fights already had occurred, and since our visit, the number of dogfights has

increased. During our trip to Crete, we met a pilot who had engaged in a dogfight with a Turkish fighter jet the day before. Such incidents follow in what are clear-cut violations of air space. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea treaty, Greece has the right to territorial waters fourteen miles beyond its shores as does Turkey. Given the proximity of many Greek islands to the Turkish mainland, any uncertainty about sovereignty is covered by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which clearly gives Greece sovereignty on all the islands to which Turkey is making claims.

A key talking point in Donald Trump's presidential campaign was that he would threaten the United States would leave NATO if its allies continue not paying their fair share. Greece, despite its economic difficulties over the past decade, has continued paying its fair share to NATO. Yet, Greece must spend approximately a half billion annually in its military budget to deal with threats from a fellow NATO ally. Additionally, the half-billion that Greece spends annually to deal with Turkish airspace violations represents over 10% of Greece's total expenditures on defense. Turkey's game of trying to lay claim through precedent by daily violations of Greek airspace is a very dangerous game to play in a small area. The shameful policies of other NATO partners are to try to stay out of this issue and let Greece and Turkey handle it themselves. However, this is a serious international issue that could worsen if Turkey continues to become increasingly aggressive.

Greece is a key ally of the United States and is one of five countries to fight with the United States in both world wars. Current Greek bilateral relations with the United States are the best in recent decades. The level of cooperation at the US military base in Souda Bay demonstrates the significance of this relationship. For example, there have been twelve American aircraft carrier visits during the last decade. Considering the significance of Greece's bilateral relations with the United States, Greece should seize the opportunity to sign a long-term defense contract with the United States at Souda Bay. A long-term agreement will boost the United States' investment in facilities at Souda Bay, and it will serve to strengthen further United States-Greece bilateral relations and present additional potential opportunities for Greece. Furthermore, the United States' difficulties at Incirlik, an American military base in Turkey, indicates the United States needs a more dependable partner in the region. Greece, via Souda Bay, has demonstrated itself as such. In the scenario that Greece signs a long-term defense cooperation agreement with the United States, and Turkey continues a trend of increased instability, the United States-Greece relationship will likely become even stronger.

Cyprus: More than just an Ethnic Dispute

Elizabeth Tzimopoulos Conway

The thermometer reads 106 degrees Fahrenheit. Beads of sweat crawl down my neck as I stand in the blazing summer sun. Surrounded by a sea of white crosses, I gaze into the distance, admiring the breathtaking beauty of the Kyrenia Mountains. My eyes scan the mountain range, tracing the peaks and valleys. I revel in the tranquility. However, in the distance is an eyesore—a red crescent and star atop a giant white rectangular blot. It is the flag of the Turkish-occupied north. But it's much more than a flag; it is a glaring symbol of injustice, a tragic emblem of lives lost, and an aggressive reminder of a crime that has eluded justice for forty years and counting. I swallow the lump in my throat as I brush aside a tear. Or maybe it's sweat.

The serenity of Nicosia's Tymvos Makedonitissa military cemetery is a stark contrast to the violence and tragedy of 1974. Tymvos is the final resting place of victims from 1974 as well as a memorial. Nearly forty-four years ago on July 20, 1974, Turkish troops invaded the island of Cyprus, beginning in the northern coastal city of Kyrenia. In an effort to deliver aid to the Cypriots, the Greeks launched Operation Niki, a clandestine airlift operation transporting a battalion of commandos aboard Greek Noratlas planes from Crete. It was an ill-fated attempt: two of the fifteen planes never made it to the island. When the remaining planes arrived in Nicosia, they were mistaken for a Turkish airborne assault and faced heavy anti-aircraft fire. One was downed before landing, right where Tymvos is located. The four crew members and twenty-seven commandos onboard the aircraft were killed. Only one commando survived by jumping out of the flaming plane. The bodies of nineteen victims remain missing to this day.

The nineteen missing victims of the Noratlas incident, however, are only a handful of the thousands of Cypriots that went missing since the invasion of 1974, 1200 of whom are still missing or unidentified, even 43 years later. Missing persons remain one of the invasion's worst legacies, but even in tragedy, there is hope. Founded in 1981, the Committee on Missing Persons (CMP) is a bi-communal group, working to help recover and identify the remains of missing persons in order to return the remains to families so that they may have a proper burial, and peace of mind. It is led by three members: a Greek Cypriot, a Turkish Cypriot, and a United Nations officer who are assisted by a skilled team of archaeologists, anthropologists, and geneticists. The CMP, which has exhumed 1,200 bodies and identified 803 so far, is living testament to how putting people over politics and uniting around our shared humanity can achieve amazing progress, even in a country where divisions are deep, history is fraught, and problems are plenty.

In talking about the situation as an ethnic conflict, we often lose sight of the human tragedies being played out. Fotis Fotiou, Presidential Commissioner for Humanitarian Issues and Overseas Cypriots, has noted, "Time is the enemy of our job." The grief of losing a loved one is beyond the imagination of those that have never felt it. However, losing these loved ones to an unlawful invasion that should never have been fought, and not even having a grave to mourn them adds insult to injury. How many parents have died with elusive hopes of having their children's remains found? One cannot but wonder. How many loved ones and friends, have been irretrievably lost to history without even a trace? In many ways, this is not only a race against time or a battle against nature; it is also one against the fate of this island torn asunder, for how can it ever find peace without healing wounds? And how can its wounds ever heal without finding closure?

This was the kaleidoscope of emotions I felt while walking through Tymvos, lost in thought. These were the very same emotions I felt as we traversed the island, witnessing the effects of the Turkish invasion. Our travels brought us to Famagusta, where an expanse of exquisite sandy beaches, once considered some of the most beautiful in the world, today wash up to a pillaged, abandoned ghost city. We walked amongst the ruins of the old Nicosia International Airport—a weed-infested runway, a crumbling control tower, and an abundance of barbed wire surrounding the destroyed terminal building. Homes pillaged, churches desecrated, buildings crumbling, beaches abandoned; the Turkish-occupied area is a haunting sight unlike any other I've ever seen.

From Tymvos to Famagusta to the Central Prison of Nicosia where we beheld the gallows where nine members of EOKA (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) faced their ultimate fate. Every moment of our trip was as rich in history as the island itself. Cyprus was one of the earliest settlements in the world. Its mineral riches were such that the island lends its name to copper, one of the most valuable ores in the world. Cyprus is the fabled birthplace of Aphrodite and the site of Othello's castle. Cyprus's future is as rich as its past. Today, its geostrategic position in the Mediterranean Sea is more crucial than ever before. The Republic of Cyprus links North Africa, Europe, and the Near East. It is a bridge of peace, connecting differing spheres of the world. And, in an island where consensus is not a common commodity, something everyone from ambassadors to politicians to lawyers to generals seem to agree on is Cyprus's strategic significance.

While Cyprus is often associated with the conflict that shaped its history, it is so much more than that. It is a "predictable, stable, and reliable" country, as government spokesman Niko Christodoulides said. To appreciate its true potential, we need to look beyond the conflict. As an anchor of regional security, a trusted American ally in the fight against terrorism, and a key party in the development of the Eastern Mediterranean's rich

hydrocarbon deposits, the Republic of Cyprus is already establishing itself as a critical partner to the United States. In this regard, energy is particularly important as it holds the potential to be a game-changer for both Cyprus and the region. The Republic of Cyprus and Israel are already working to jointly develop the oil and gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, and more ambitious projects like a proposed pipeline extending from Israel to Europe, passing through Cyprus and Greece, is already in the works.

Examples of bicomunal cooperation such as the CMP as well as the island's immense economic potential (thanks to the discovery of rich hydrocarbon deposits) raise hopes for a future where Cyprus will come to be defined by more than just the conflict that endures there to this day. Such a future, however, is only possible in an island that is healed and united. With nearly half of the island carved away into an illegal and illegitimate authority—sustained only because of the economic support and military strength of a foreign country—neither of those steps is possible. The occupation is like a straitjacket holding back the island—and this should be the principle guiding the U.S.'s policy on Cyprus. The path to a lasting peace starts with the cessation of all foreign interference and leads to a future where Cypriots alone hold the future of Cyprus in their hands.

Disrespect of Religious Sites in Cyprus

Stavros Piperis

More than forty years have passed since Turkey's invasion of the Republic of Cyprus in 1974. Often, when so many years have passed since a geopolitical atrocity, its remains are treated with complacency. The flames of the original conflict die down, leaving later generations with a cemented state of affairs, the words and deeds of their ancestors mere echoes swept up by the winds of current politics and plausibility. Cyprus, however, still cries out for change. There is a lasting, living disharmony on the island, too vivid and unsettling to be dismissed as "just the way it is, now." Amid the barbed wire and the buffer zone, social and political friction persists throughout Cyprus, begging for a swift resolution.

Shortly after landing at Larnaca International Airport, visitors to Cyprus almost instantly face the island's sociopolitical discord. Looming over the nation's divided capital, Nicosia, is a gigantic flag of the self-proclaimed "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" plastered across the Kyrenia Mountains. It is four hundred and fifty meters long, glaring at the city and its surroundings throughout the day. An identical second flag lights up in the night, ensuring that not a moment passes in which a Cypriot can gaze upon his land without his invader staring down at him. This eerie monument is just one of Turkey's many provocative attempts to dispute and disrespect Cyprus' sovereignty and people.

Deep into the area occupied by Turkey lies a tiny church where the bones of Saint Barnabas, a revered figure of early Christianity, are buried. Saint Barnabas, who journeyed alongside Saint Paul during his first apostolic mission in the region, is the Patron Saint of Cyprus. Few would guess, however, that this particular church marks the spot of the great saint's remains. The building's security consists of a shabby chain-link fence, the consequences of which are obvious. Lacking the artistic grandeur that characterizes most Greek Orthodox churches, the building's walls and ceiling are barren. The only indicators of any involvement with the faith, let alone the presence of one of its most venerated figures' relics, are a few modest wooden icons—turned backwards to face the wall. To observe the actual resting place of Saint Barnabas, one must descend a rocky stairwell into the cramped chamber where his poorly kept coffin lies. Even the icons beside his remains have been flipped backwards. Here, where the Christian faith is pettily disputed but the cobwebs are undisturbed, the strife that continues to haunt Cyprus is undeniable.

Elsewhere in the occupied area stands an even more startling example of Cyprus' tragic state—another church, this one ravaged and barely standing. Weeds crawl out from the cracked dirt surrounding what was once an entrance. Here, too, the walls and ceiling are white and ruined, but no icon can be found. Instead, “*Allahu Akbar*” (Allah [God] is [the] Greatest), along with some illegible writings, is chicken-scratched near where the narthex must have once been. The small plot of land the building sits upon bears a single above-ground coffin, ripped open and defaced, and a few stumps of rock that used to be tombstones—the remains of which were stuffed in a nearby shack with other smashed artifacts. These sights are at once numbing and repulsive. It is difficult to guess how long ago this particular church was demolished, but the scene is a painful one for any viewer who has ever honored a loved one with a proper burial or taken refuge in a place of worship. Hatred lingers in Cyprus as it does on this lot; often ignored, but unmistakable if one does not avert his or her eyes.

Although the island continues to suffer through hardship, it is not too late for Cyprus. The lives of Cypriots today are still intimately affected by the Turkish invasion of 1974. Their land, their origins, and their immediate family history were all permanently altered by the events of that summer. The Cypriot people's generational proximity to the first sins of the “Cyprus Problem” makes a resolution urgent. Let us honor their home, recognize their heartache, and fight for the unified island that they can still remember.

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