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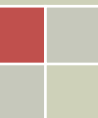
## **IKV BRIEF**

# **MAKE-OR-BREAK TIME FOR A CYPRUS SETTLEMENT**

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## Make-or-break time for a Cyprus settlement

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As the two leaders in Cyprus embarked on a fresh round of intensive talks under the auspices of UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser Eide on 23 August 2016, stakes for reaching a settlement in Cyprus by end of 2016 could not be higher. The picture that emerges as a result of the seven meetings scheduled until 14 September will be vital in ascertaining whether a breakthrough in resolving the most enduring frozen conflict in Europe by the end of this year would be possible.

The momentum generated in the latest round of talks, which commenced under the leadership of two pro-solution leaders Akıncı and Anastasiades in May 2015, has created optimism that the intractable Cyprus question, which has been remained on the agenda of the international community over the last six decades, is finally within reach. In a joint statement marking the first anniversary of the resumption talks, while acknowledging that difficulties and differences do exist despite the progress made, the two leaders have pledged to intensify their efforts with the aim of reaching a comprehensive settlement by the end of 2016. Despite an initial slowdown in the talks partly due to the parliamentary election period in the South, since June 2016 the leaders have intensified their efforts for reaching a settlement by the end of this year.

During the upcoming meetings scheduled until 14 September 2016, Turkish Cypriot President Mustafa Akıncı and Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades will work to reconcile their differences on the outstanding aspects of the four chapters on which major convergences have already been attained (i.e.: governance and power-sharing, EU matters, economy and property). The issue of rotating presidency, which the Turkish Cypriot side sees as *sine quo non* for ensuring its political equality, remains unresolved. Despite statements confirming the progress achieved on the property dossier, which has been referred to as the Gordian knot in the talks, reportedly a couple of issues remain open. It is important to note that it is the first time that the two sides have gone into so much detail concerning the property issue. The progress made on those will also be decisive in discussions on the thorny and emotionally-charged dossiers concerning territorial adjustments and security and guarantees which have so far only been discussed generally. Special Adviser Eide confirms that the two sides have arrived at a stage, in which the intractable aspects of the Cyprus problem have become tractable and there are no issues which are regarded as a taboo in the talks.

The fact that both Akıncı and Anastasiades will travel to New York in the second half of September, the former for bilateral contacts and the latter for the UN General Assembly, has created an expectation that an eventual trilateral meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban could be held. Considering that neither leader has ruled out this possibility,



provided that sufficient progress is attained in the marathon talks till 14 September, a trilateral meeting with UN Secretary General Ban could convene in New York on the margins of the 71<sup>st</sup> UN General Assembly. This could unlock the possibility of setting a date for a five-party conference with the participation of the three guarantor powers; Turkey, Greece and the UK, for determining the future of the security architecture created by the 1960 Treaties of Guarantee and Alliance.

The chapter of security and guarantees is undoubtedly a major sticking point in the talks. So far the issue has not been discussed in detail; it has only been taken up in a brainstorming session on 29 July 2016. The Greek Cypriot side, backed by Greece, is vehemently opposed to the continuation of the current system of international guarantees which it regards as anachronistic. The Greek Cypriots consider Turkey's military presence on the island as a major source of insecurity. The Turkish Cypriot side on the other hand- for whom the memories of recurrent episodes of inter-communal strife during the 1963-1974 period, are still fresh- views the continuation of Turkey's guarantor status as vital for ensuring its survival. The failed coup attempt perpetrated on the night of 15 July 2016 in Turkey by the associates of a clandestine terrorist group, which has infiltrated state institutions over decades, was instrumentalized by Athens and South Nicosia which have become visibly more vocal in their demand for the termination of the system of guarantees. The attempts by Greek and Greek Cypriot authorities to use the failed coup attempt in Turkey as a pretext to question Turkey's status as a guarantor power were strongly denounced by Ankara. As the latest events suggest, finding a formula, which sufficiently addresses the security needs of the Turkish Cypriots but at the same time does not ring alarm bells in the South, will be tricky.

If the parties manage to sort out their differences on these highly complicated issues, it would pave the way for a settlement plan being prepared to be put to a popular vote in simultaneous referenda on both sides of the Green Line in early 2017.

The next couple of months are highly critical as the current window of opportunity could close by 2017. Two upcoming external developments namely; the November 2016 US presidential elections and elections to determine the next UN Secretary-General increase the time pressure on the parties. Leadership change both in the US and at the helm of the UN highlight the end of 2016 as a natural deadline. With the end of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's mandate at the end of this year, Ban's successor will require time to study and gain an insight into the highly complex Cyprus problem, time that Cypriots can hardly afford. Similarly, with the new US President set to take office in January 2017, Vice-President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry - two key figures who have been very involved in Cyprus - will be replaced. It remains to be seen where the Cyprus problem would rank in the next US administration's list of foreign policy priorities.



Internally, the upcoming presidential elections in the South and the possibility of a new round of exploratory drilling in disputed waters off the shores of Cyprus are the two factors that increase the sense of urgency for reaching a settlement within the next couple of months. If the talks drag on to 2017, they risk coinciding with the advancing presidential election period in the South. Although the elections in the South are not due until February 2018, the pre-election campaign period could kick off as early as March 2017. The pre-election campaign period will undoubtedly increase the pressure on Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades and limit his room for manoeuvre rendering bold steps and compromises on thorny issues difficult.

Furthermore, recent statements by international gas companies such as Italian Eni and French Total that they will start exploratory drilling for hydrocarbons in disputed waters off the southern shores of the island in 2017 heighten the likelihood for potential tensions between Turkey and the Greek Cypriot Administration and risk undermining the atmosphere surrounding the talks. Given the fact that a similar episode in 2014 had led to the collapse of the talks, there is reason to believe that exploration activities unilaterally permitted by the Greek Cypriot Administration in total disregard for the Turkish Cypriots' legitimate rights are highly likely to cause friction between the two communities as well as between the South and Ankara.

12 years after the initial hope and the subsequent trauma generated by the rise and demise of the Annan Plan as a result of rejection by an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriots, the current round of talks with the Akıncı-Anastasiades duo in the driver's seat, is regarded by many as the best and probably the last chance for a settlement in Cyprus- at least according to the established recipe; namely the creation of a bizonal and bicomunal federation with political equality. As the older generations cease to exist, time is not on the side of Cypriots. There is the risk that younger generations on both sides who lack memories of co-existence with the members of the other community could be more tempted to explore different options and permanent division could be on the cards. Therefore, it is imperative that a settlement is reached before the current window of opportunity closes and the current attempt, which President Akıncı rightly calls "the last trial of their generation", becomes the latest addition to the divided island's long history of missed opportunities.

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\* Yeliz Şahin is the author of the IKV publication "*Reuniting Cyprus: New Dynamics & Implications for Turkey-EU Relations*" (2016).

