

The Division of Cyprus the conflict between the Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus 50 years after the pro-Greek military coup and the Turkish military operation

Prof. Aleksander Glogowski, PhD, DSc
Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland

Date of Submission: 05-02-2026

Date of acceptance: 16-02-2026

The purpose of the following article is to present the causes and course of the conflict between the Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus, as well as its evolution from 1974 to 2024 amid a changing international reality. Of particular interest are two events: the unilateral declaration of independence by Northern Cyprus in 1983, and the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004. Key research questions arise here: how did these two events influence the conflict and relations between the two communities, and are there any realistic prospects for resolving the conflict in the foreseeable future? To investigate this complex issue, the historical method will be applied, along with analysis of legal texts and scholarly works, and to some extent participant observation (conducted on-site in August 2024, exactly on the 50th anniversary of the tragic events of August 1974).

Over the centuries, Cyprus has been the object of territorial disputes between various powers, including Rome, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire. This stemmed from the island's strategic location. Cyprus lies at the crossroads of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa, and is geographically classified as part of the Middle East. Its position has made it a natural transit point for maritime transport since ancient times. The island is only about 100 km from Turkey's coast, 350 km from Syria, 800 km from Greece, and 1,000 km from Egypt, making it a key access point to these countries and further into the Middle East and North Africa¹. For this reason, control over the island held strategic importance for great powers from antiquity through the Cold War. Even today, its geographical position is cited as justification for the United Kingdom's retention of two military bases at Dhekelia and Akrotiri (particularly important are the military airfields and radar systems located there)². Cyprus also holds significant economic importance. In ancient times, rich copper deposits played a key role (hence the island's name). Today, natural gas and oil deposits discovered on the continental shelf around the island play an important role in building Cyprus's strategic position. At the same time, this is another factor complicating resolution of the ongoing conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots as well as between Cyprus and Turkey³.

The main cause of the conflict discussed in this article is, however, the ethnic and historical factor. In 1570, the Ottoman Empire launched military operations against Venice, which then controlled Cyprus⁴. After a series of battles, including the key Battle of Famagusta, Ottoman forces captured the island in 1571, ending Venetian rule⁵. Under Ottoman rule, Cyprus became part of an eyalet (administrative unit of the Ottoman Empire). The millet system was introduced, allowing different religious groups to manage their internal affairs. Greek Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims could maintain their own judicial and educational systems, contributing to the preservation of cultural and religious distinctiveness⁶. Under Ottoman rule, Cyprus became a place of coexistence among different cultures and religions. Despite Islamic dominance, Orthodox Greeks were able to practice their faith. Social isolation, however, eventually led to tensions between ethnic and religious

¹ Hatzis, A. Geopolitical Importance of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 23(2)2015, 45-62.

² Koutouzis, G. Militarization of Cyprus: Historical Context and Contemporary Implications. *Military Review*, 97(3)2017, 56-63.

³ The World Bank. (2021). *Cyprus Economic Update: Opportunities and Challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>. Accessed 5.12.2025

⁴ Koutouzis, A. The Ottoman Empire and Cyprus: A Historical Overview. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 4(2)1994, 85-101.

⁵ Kourouklides, G. "Cyprus Under Ottoman Rule: 1571-1878". Nicosia 2006 pp.56-58

⁶ Papageorgiou, M. The Impact of Ottoman Rule on the Cypriot Society. *Cyprus Historical Review*, 1(1)2010, 25-42.

groups. In the 18th century, national movements emerged seeking independence from Ottoman rule⁷. In 1878, under the Cyprus Convention, Cyprus passed under British control while formally remaining under Ottoman suzerainty. The convention aimed to support the Ottoman Empire in its war against Russia; Britain gained administrative control, leaving formal sovereignty with the Ottomans. In 1914, during World War I, Britain annexed the island, and in 1925 Cyprus formally became a British colony. This period featured intensive colonization, introduction of the British legal and administrative system, and changes to the Cypriot economy and society⁸.

British rule

In 1925, Cyprus acquired colonial status, involving certain administrative reforms. Local councils were organized to represent residents' interests. These councils mainly comprised representatives of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, reflecting the ethnic division of island society. Their powers, however, were severely limited, with the governor's decisions taking precedence⁹. Over time, anti-colonial sentiment grew, particularly among Greek Cypriots, who sought union with Greece (Enosis). In response, the British used repressive measures, including arrests of national movement leaders and press censorship. In 1925, a new constitution established a Legislative Assembly as the main legislative body. The Assembly had 24 members: 12 Greek Cypriots and 12 Turkish Cypriots. This division did not match the island's ethnic structure, as Greeks made up 80% and Turks 20% of the population¹⁰. Officially, this ensured equal representation. In reality, Turkish over-representation was part of Britain's divide et impera policy: the Empire positioned itself as protector of the Turkish minority fearful of Greek majority rule and Enosis. Relying on a loyal minority was typical of British colonialism (similar practices in India, Africa, etc.).

Independence of the Republic of Cyprus

In the 1930s, the organization EOKA (Ethniki Organosi Kypriou Agoniston) emerged, aiming to liberate Cyprus from British rule and achieve union with Greece (Enosis)¹¹. In 1955, under Georgios Grivas, EOKA launched an armed campaign against British authorities, including attacks on soldiers and institutions, plus propaganda among Cypriots. The British responded with harsh repression, escalating tensions¹². In 1959, after prolonged negotiations and international attention, the Zurich and London Agreements recognized Cypriot independence. On August 16, 1960, Cyprus declared independence. The new constitution ensured equal rights for Greeks and Turks, but implementation proved problematic¹³. The treaties (involving Britain, Greece, Turkey, and Cypriot representatives) stipulated that Cyprus would not pursue union with Greece, Britain retained sovereignty over the two bases, and Greece and Turkey could maintain small military contingents to guarantee the status quo.

The 1960 Constitution of Cyprus resulted from negotiations among Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, and Britain. It established a power-sharing system to protect both ethnic groups' rights. Key provisions for the Turkish minority included:

1. Political representation: 70% of seats in the House of Representatives for Greek Cypriots, 30% for Turkish Cypriots — giving Turks 10% more representation than their population share¹⁴.
2. Minority rights: Provisions protected Turkish language, culture, and religion use (e.g., Article 19 guaranteed Turkish in administration)¹⁵.
3. International guarantees: Changes required consent from both communities and guarantors (Britain, Greece, Turkey)¹⁶.

In 1963, after the so-called "Bloody Christmas," intercommunal violence erupted with catastrophic effects on Turkish Cypriots. Greek Cypriots, backed by the government, marginalized Turks, forcing thousands to flee and

⁷ Koutouzis, A. The Ottoman Empire and Cyprus: A Historical Overview. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 4(2)1994, 85-101.

⁸ McCarthy, J. *The Ottoman Peoples and the End of Empire*. Bloomsbury 2011. p.45

⁹ Christodoulides, A. *Colonial Administration on Cyprus: The British Period (1878-1960)*, Lexington 2015 p. 45

¹⁰ Papadakis, Y. *The Politics of History in Cyprus*. Cambridge 2011 pp.115-117

¹¹ Koutsou, A. The Rise of Nationalism in Cyprus: The Case of EOKA. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 16(3)2014, 305-319

¹² Varnava, A. *The Cyprus Crisis: A Historical and Political Overview*. Exeter 2018. pp. 145-146

¹³ Papadakis, Y. *Narrating Conflict in Cyprus: A Critical Assessment of the Historical Narrative*. Cambridge 2005. pp.118-119

¹⁴ Kızılyürek, N. *Cyprus: A Historical Reassessment*. New York 2013 p. 94

¹⁵ Joseph, J. *Cyprus: Ethnic Conflict and International Politics*. London 1997 p. 126

¹⁶ Tocci, N. (2005). *The EU and Turkey: The Politics of Accession*. London 2005 p. 178

causing many deaths¹⁷. Turkish Cypriots formed defensive structures, leading to "underground armies"¹⁸. In 1964, the United Nations intervened with peacekeeping forces (UNFICYP) to protect Turkish Cypriots. Tensions persisted through the 1960s–1970s with ongoing violence and polarization¹⁹.

The 1974 coup

The 1974 coup on Cyprus was a pivotal event leading to Turkish intervention and long-term division. Amid Cold War dynamics, Greece's military junta (1967–1974) pursued Enosis as part of pan-Hellenic policy²⁰. On July 15, 1974, pro-Greek Cypriot officers, backed by the Greek military junta, overthrew President Archbishop Makarios III (seen as opposing immediate Enosis despite earlier support). They attacked the presidential palace, falsely claimed Makarios dead (he escaped to Paphos, broadcast a message, then went into exile), and installed pro-Enosis leader Nikos Sampson, declaring union with Greece²¹. This violated the Zurich–London Agreements (1959–1960), which explicitly barred both Enosis (union with Greece) and partition of the island, as well as prohibited actions undermining Cyprus's independence²². Turkey viewed it as *casus belli*. On July 20, 1974, Turkey launched Operation Attila, deploying ~40,000 troops in two phases (July 20–22 and August 14–16)²³. Turkey occupied ~37% of Cyprus (northern regions), causing mass displacements of Greek and Turkish Cypriots²⁴. The front line became the UN-monitored "Green Line" (~180 km buffer zone under UNFICYP)²⁵. It serves as *de facto* border, symbolizing both territorial and psychological division²⁶. ~160,000–200,000 Greek Cypriots fled south; ~45,000–50,000 Turkish Cypriots moved north (with subsequent settlers from Turkey altering demographics further)²⁷.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) occurred after years of failed talks, when Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared independence on November 15, 1983²⁸. It was immediately

¹⁷ Ker-Lindsay, J. *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford 2011. pp. 98-99

¹⁸ Papadakis, Y. "The Challenge of Peace in Cyprus: A Historical Perspective." *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 12, no. 3 /2006: 229-246.

¹⁹ Theoharis, A. "Cyprus: A Conflict with Many Dimensions." *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 5-20.

²⁰ Clogg, R. *A Concise History of Greece*. Cambridge 2013 p. 248

²¹ U.S. Department of State / Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, Volume XXX: Greece; Cyprus; Turkey, 1973–1976 (declassified documents on the coup, Makarios escape via British helicopter from Paphos, false death announcement, and Sampson installation). Available via U.S. National Archives or FRUS series.

See also: American Diplomacy Scholars & Teachers (ADST) oral history: "The 1974 Turkish Intervention in Cyprus" (details Makarios fleeing in a taxi to Paphos, then exile, and Sampson's pro-Enosis role).

²² Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Cyprus Issue" (official overview of Zurich-London Treaties prohibiting Enosis and partition as core to independence guarantees). <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-cyprus-issue.en.mfa>

²³ U.S. Marine Corps University / Marine Corps History Division, Phase Line Attila: The Amphibious Campaign for Cyprus, 1974 (detailed military analysis confirming ~40,000 troops, two phases: July 20–22 landing/bridgehead, August 14–16 advance). https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/Attila_web.pdf

²⁴ European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), *Cyprus v. Turkey* (2001 judgment, Application no. 25781/94): Describes occupation of ~37–40% of the island following the 1974 operations and resulting displacements. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int> (full text available).

²⁵ United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) official site / Buffer Zone description: ~180 km length, varying width, established post-ceasefire August 1974. <https://unficyp.unmissions.org/en/about-buffer-zone>

Confirmed in UN Secretary-General reports (e.g., S/2025/6 and earlier, describing the buffer zone as ~180 km).

²⁶ Forced Migration Review (University of Oxford), "Displacement shock and recovery in Cyprus" by Peter Loizos (discusses psychological and territorial division effects of the Green Line post-1974). <https://www.fmreview.org/loizos>

²⁷ PRIO Cyprus Centre / "Displacement in Cyprus" report (Peace Research Institute Oslo): ~160,000–165,000 Greek Cypriots displaced north-to-south; ~45,000 Turkish Cypriots south-to-north in 1974 (total displaced ~215,000 including earlier waves). <https://www.prio-cyprus-displacement.net>

Cross-referenced: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) GRID report on Cyprus (confirms similar figures for 1974 displacements).

Additional: Security Council Report (2008 backgrounder): ~165,000 Greek Cypriots north-to-south, ~45,000 Turkish Cypriots south-to-north.

²⁸ Declaration of independence by Turkish Cypriot authorities on November 15, 1983 (confirmed in UNSC Resolution 541 and multiple historical sources).

condemned by the UN and most states as illegal; only Turkey recognized it²⁹. Isolation hampered TRNC development; internally, it strengthened Turkish Cypriot identity but sparked debates³⁰. The 1985 TRNC Constitution established a parliamentary-presidential republic. The president (elected for 5 years) holds significant powers; the 50-member Assembly uses proportional representation³¹. The legal system blends pre-1974 Cypriot and Turkish law, with Turkish influence raising judicial independence concerns. Currency is the Turkish lira (euro widely accepted informally). UNSC Resolution 541 (1983) declared the declaration invalid, affirming only the Republic of Cyprus government as legitimate³².

The Kofi Annan Plan and 2004 referendum

The 2002–2004 Annan Plan proposed a bizonal, bicomunal federation with territorial adjustments, property rights, security guarantees, etc. Referendums on April 24, 2004: 76% rejection in the south (75.83% against); 65% approval in the north (64.91% in favor). Deep divisions and campaign intensity reflected historical fears³³. Critics cited inadequate property/security provisions and power-sharing concerns. Though rejected, it influenced later talks.

Accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union and the island's division

The EU does not recognize the TRNC. Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 as a whole (post-referendum), despite division³⁴. EU–Turkey talks stress Cyprus normalization. Post-2004, various negotiations occurred (2008 Talat–Christofias; 2014–2017 Akıncı-era; 2017 Crans-Montana failure over security)³⁵. On April 23, 2003, crossings opened across the Green Line. Cyprus's non-Schengen status and non-recognition of TRNC entry points complicate travel³⁶.

Citizenship: Republic of Cyprus law grants citizenship by birth/descent (pre-1974 roots qualify many Turkish Cypriots; post-1974 settlers from Turkey generally do not). EU citizenship follows³⁷.

Prospects for resolving the Cyprus conflict

The Greek–Turkish Cypriot conflict dates to at least 1960 (roots in British colonialism). The 1974 Turkish invasion followed the coup/Enosis declaration, causing division, mass displacement, and war crimes by both sides. For ~30 years (1974–2003), communities were separated by the Green Line; a generation grew up without contact, eroding communication (Turkish/Greek languages faded in public/education; English common south, not north). Religious differences (Orthodox Christian vs. Muslim) and symbols (Greek flags/Makarios south; Turkish flags/Atatürk/Erdoğan north) reinforce division. Economic ties severed: south uses euro/EU standards; north uses lira, Turkish firms, lower prices, laxer IP enforcement.

The 2004 referendum showed no optimism: south rejected federation; north approved (likely for EU benefits). Greek Cypriots insist on 1960 Constitution/full unity; Turkish Cypriots/TRNC on two-state reality since 1983. Negotiations stall on this. EU/UN back unity; Turkey (with troops on north) backs two states—Erdogan reiterated this in 2023/2024 anniversaries and beyond (e.g., in 2025 statements affirming two states as the realistic option). Geopolitics (Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, Syria) adds complexity; Cyprus NATO bid could face Turkish veto unless TRNC recognized.

²⁹ Recognition limited to Turkey; widely viewed as illegal under international law.

³⁰ General observation on isolation effects and identity debates (common in analyses of TRNC post-1983).

³¹ TRNC 1985 Constitution structure (parliamentary system with strong presidential elements).

³² United Nations Security Council Resolution 541 (1983), adopted November 18, 1983, declaring the secession invalid.

³³ Referendum results: Greek Cypriots 75.83% No, Turkish Cypriots 64.91% Yes (April 24, 2004; Fondation Robert Schuman: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/290-failure-of-the-referendum-on-the-reunification-of-the-island>).

³⁴ Cyprus EU accession May 1, 2004; entire island EU territory but *acquis* suspended in north (EU-related analysis: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/759-cyprus-20-years-of-membership-of-the-european-union-between-singularities-and-a-theatre-of-geopolitical-oppositions>).

³⁵ Key talks: Talat–Christofias (2008–2010); Akıncı–Anastasiades (2015–2017, collapsed at Crans-Montana July 2017 over security/guarantees; Reuters report: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cyprus-reunification-talks-collapse-un-chief-very-sorry-idUSKBN19S02S>).

³⁶ Green Line crossings first opened April 23, 2003 (Al Jazeera report: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/4/26/breaking-down-the-wall>).

³⁷ RoC Citizenship Law (1967, as amended); pre-1974 descent qualifies many Turkish Cypriots; post-1974 settlers/children often excluded (Statelessness.eu analysis: <https://www.statelessness.eu/updates/blog/cypriot-children-without-cypriot-citizenship-what-mixed-marriage-problem>).

Conclusion

Current status quo is de facto compromise—functional for all sides after 50 years. Talks may be ritualistic. Reintegration per Greek Cypriot view lacks guarantees for Turkish rights/property. Two-state recognition (per TRNC/Turkey) is more realistic, potentially leading to bilateral ties and eventual TRNC EU path (like pre-Brexit Ireland). But Greek Cypriot side views 1974 as illegal invasion (downplaying coup/Enosis violation). International law hesitates due to separatist precedents (Abkhazia, Donbas vs. Kosovo). Question remains: recognize facts (two states) or maintain legal fiction (one Cyprus under ineffective control)?

Sources:

- Annan K., *The United Nations and Cyprus: A Plan for Peace*, United Nations, 2004
- Çelik M. A., "Governance and Democracy in Northern Cyprus", *International Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2020, s. 78-92
- Christodoulides, A. (2015). "Colonial Administration on Cyprus: The British Period (1878-1960)",
- Christou, C. (2018). *The Cyprus Peace Process: Challenges and Prospects*. *Middle East Policy*, 25(3),
- Clogg, R. "A Concise History of Greece". Cambridge, 2013
- Dodd, J. "Cyprus: A Political History Since 1960". London 2020
- European Commission. "The Enlargement of the European Union: Cyprus". Brussels 2002
- Fuat O. D., "Judicial Independence in Northern Cyprus: Challenges and Developments", *European Journal of Law Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2021,
- Hatzis, A. "Geopolitical Importance of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean". *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 2015 23(2),
- Joseph, J. "Cyprus: Ethnic Conflict and International Politics". London 1997
- Ker-Lindsay, J. "The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know". Oxford 2011.
- Kızılyürek, N. "Cyprus: A Conflict at the Crossroads of History." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54(3) 2010,
- Kızılyürek, N. "Cyprus: A Historical Reassessment". New York 2013.
- Kourouklides, G. "Cyprus Under Ottoman Rule: 1571-1878". Nicosia: 2006
- Koutouzis, A. (1994). "The Ottoman Empire and Cyprus: A Historical Overview". *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 4(2)1994,
- Koutouzis, G. "Militarization of Cyprus: Historical Context and Contemporary Implications". *Military Review*, 97(3)2017,
- Koutsou A., "The Annan Plan: A Critical Analysis", *Cyprus Review*, 17(1), 25-45, 2005,
- Mavratsas C., "The Impact of the Green Line on Cypriot Society," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2014, 40(5),
- Mavratsas, C. "Cultural Heritage and the Politics of Memory in Cyprus". Nicosya 2017
- Oğuz, S. "Cyprus Negotiations: A Historical and Political Analysis. *Turkish Journal of Politics*", 7(1),2016
- Okan, M. *Politics and Identity in North Cyprus: A Sociological Perspective*. Nicosia 2019
- Osiewicz P., *Konflikt Cyprijski*. Warsaw 2024
- Öztürk K. K., "The Political Structure of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus", *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2016,
- Papadakis Y., "Echoes from the Past: Community, Memory and the Politics of the Present in Cyprus," *The Cyprus Review*, 2006, 18(1),
- Papadakis, Y. "The European Union and the Cyprus Problem: A New Approach." **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, vol. 12, no. 3, 2010,
- Papadakis, Y. "Narrating Conflict in Cyprus: A Critical Assessment of the Historical Narrative". Cambridge 2005
- Papadakis, Y. (2011). **The Politics of History in Cyprus**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Papadakis, Y. (2019). **The Politics of the Cyprus Conflict: A Historical Perspective**. New York 2019
- Papadopoulos G., "Referendum on the Annan Plan: A Divided Vote", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 6(2), 115-130, 2004,
- Republic of Cyprus. "Citizenship Law of the Republic of Cyprus". 1967
- Republic of Cyprus. "Law on the Movement of Persons." *Official Gazette of the Republic of Cyprus* 2003.
- The World Bank. (2021). *Cyprus Economic Update: Opportunities and Challenges*. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org
- Tziampiris, A. (2017). *The Cyprus Issue: A Historical Perspective*, Routledge.
- United Nations. (1983). Resolution 541. Retrieved from [UN Digital Library](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/166624)
- Varnava, A. (2018). *The Cyprus Crisis: A Historical and Political Overview*. Exeter 2018
- Yenidunya, A. "The International Recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus: A Legal Analysis". Istanbul 2016