

British Policy on Cyprus 1974-2002

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Britain's sovereign base areas on Cypriot soil, secured in 1960 by the Treaty of Establishment, were intended to support British strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Soon, instead of the bases serving the strategy, the only strategy was to keep the bases. Even that, for a period, was in doubt. In December 1963, when the Cyprus Constitution was imploding, the British Ministry of Defence responded to a query from the Prime Minister, Sir Alex Douglas-Home, as to what was the purpose of the base areas. He was informed that they provided a launch pad for nuclear operations on Russia's frontiers with Turkey or Iran, a reserve staging post for the Middle East, and an advance base should British forces require to be committed in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹ Douglas-Home appears to have been unimpressed by these needs – 'They seem rather thin' – and to have been far more receptive to the memorandum supplied by his Foreign Office private secretary, Oliver Wright, who wrote that, the 1960 constitution having broken down, 'our commitment in Cyprus is becoming both undesirable and unnecessary. It does us no good either at home or abroad and we should consider ways of decently liquidating it'.²

Why, therefore, are the bases and the important additional sites outside the bases that, under the Treaty, are also reserved for British use still there to this day? Two brief answers are that their critical importance for electronic interception (which the MoD curiously omitted to mention to Douglas-Home) enables British intelligence officers to look their American counterparts in the eye, giving much added value to the special relationship; while, secondly, Cypriots, from Archbishop Makarios onwards, have avoided seriously forcing the issue of their continuance. Indeed, the Archbishop managed the remarkable feat of figuring prominently in Non-Aligned conferences while at the same time acquiescing without a murmur in major intelligence operations on behalf of the Western side in the cold war. The Americans regarded the base areas and additional sites as being of such major importance that whenever the British floated the idea of including them in projected defence cuts the full weight of Washington was thrown on the side of retaining them. For instance when defence cuts were debated in the British Cabinet on 28 November 1974 the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, according to his colleague Barbara Castle said that, while the Americans were relaxed about many aspects, they were 'unhappy about the idea of our withdrawing from Cyprus and could see the eastern Mediterranean becoming a Russian lake'.³

One thing, which the British had hoped to obtain from surrendering sovereignty

over the island as a whole was release from involvement in Cypriot politics. Though the 1960 constitution was thought by many to be too complicated, its great merit lay in its being co-authored by Greece and Turkey and, doubtful though the British might be about the viability arrangements which included so many un-amendable Basic Laws, they signed up to the Treaty of Guarantee. In the event of its provisions being breached they reserved the right to take action, jointly with Greece and Turkey if possible but if necessary alone, 'with the sole aim of re-establishing the state of affairs created' by the Treaty.

The events of 1974 left many people in Britain with a sinking feeling that as the former colonial power she had not done as well as she should have done by Cyprus. True enough the wording of the Treaty of Guarantee, that Britain 'reserves the right' to take independent action, did not oblige her to do so. But nevertheless there was a sense in which the keeping of military bases under the separate though obviously associated Treaty of Establishment seemed in much of the public mind to carry reciprocal obligations. This, for example, led the House of Commons Select Committee in 1975 to conclude that 'Britain had a legal right, a moral obligation and the military capacity to intervene in Cyprus during July and August 1974.'¹⁴

This opinion, which was not accepted by the Labour Government of Harold Wilson, was carried in the Committee by a four to one majority, but the single dissenter, the former Deputy Governor of Cyprus, Sir George Sinclair, who was now Conservative M.P., paradoxically came closer to the Government's view and to professional military opinion. He questioned whether, if Britain had in the first instance acted alone against the Greek coup, her forces on the island would have been adequate against Greek and Greek Cypriot forces to overthrow the Sampson regime. Sir George maintained that 'an armed intervention by Britain, which revived memories of the conflict with EOKA in the 1950s might well have had the effect of swinging Greek Cypriot opinion behind rather than against Sampson. We might have found ourselves caught up in a prolonged and indecisive guerrilla-type war.'¹⁵ The British forces had had bitter experience of fighting Cypriots and they did not wish to risk a repetition. Decolonisation was supposed to carry immunity from such embarrassing engagements.

But the British could scarcely enjoy complete detachment because their two military bases enabled Turkey to put them on the spot by proposing that, since Britain and Turkey were both guarantor powers, they should jointly intervene. To this end the Turks wished to make use of the British bases. This was not going to appeal to Whitehall since such collaboration would be likely to destroy the careful diplomatic work put in since 1960 to make the continued British presence on the island acceptable to Greek Cypriot opinion.

The Labour Party had only recently returned to power in Britain after having

been passionately hostile to the military government in Athens and highly critical of any tendency to treat Greece as a normal NATO member. But Labour leaders also bore in memory a key episode of a previous period in opposition: the crisis over Suez. Though the Treaties of Guarantee and Establishment were signed four years after Suez, Britain's attitude towards unilateral action in the Mediterranean was largely determined by this earlier crisis. James Callaghan, the Foreign Secretary at the time of the 1974 crisis, had in 1956 taunted Anthony Eden's disingenuous policies from a recumbent position on the Opposition Front Bench. And in two passages in his autobiographical chapter on his handling of Cyprus he refers back to Suez and the conclusion drawn from it that Britain should not undertake military action without assured American support. That support, especially against the Turks at the time of their second attack, was notably missing.

The best chance for British intervention occurred during the first hours after the Greek coup and, if the British had been prepared to take a gamble on Makarios's continued popularity with the Greek Cypriot people, they might well have pulled it off. After all, the Turkish Government at that stage was demanding that the Archbishop be restored. But gamble it would have been nevertheless and neither the new Labour Government nor, especially, their military chiefs were disposed to take it, all the more so as they felt that in a potential situation of civil war their first responsibility was towards the British families resident in Cyprus and the large number of British holiday-makers disporting themselves along its coasts. Also, they had to take into account that, while Makarios was not exactly popular in Britain, he was much less so in the United States who made it quite clear that she did not wish him to be restored and was not prepared to agree to a joint military action.⁶

Nevertheless, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was from the very start of the crisis by no means inactive, though whether it had any advance warning of the Greek coup will have to await the release of papers in 2005.⁷ Apart from the safety of British subjects its first aim was to reverse the situation fast enough to avoid armed response from Turkey. Archbishop Makarios was rescued from Paphos by an RAF helicopter and Greece was told to recall her officers attached to the Cyprus National Guard. Britain's support for Makarios and her scarcely concealed hostility to the Greek military regime were not welcome to Henry Kissinger in Washington, who was right in the middle of having to cope with the collapse of Richard Nixon's Presidency on account of Watergate. There was also intense rivalry between the Secretaries of Defence and of State over American policy. James Schlesinger, the Secretary of Defence, wanted to bring the heaviest of pressure to bear on the Greek military government to reverse its folly while Kissinger did not wish to do so; according to Kissinger's later writing this position stemmed from the rather contrived calculation that America by seeming anti-Greek would be thought by the Turks as offering them a go-ahead to invade Cyprus. The President would normally decide such an issue between the rivals but Nixon was by now essentially out of action.⁸

When he flew to London Prime Minister Ecevit failed to obtain use of the British bases and in turn refused to join in an invitation to Greece to a conference of the three guarantors. Callaghan admits that at this point he was wrong in thinking a Turkish military invasion was not imminent but he says that the Americans had thought the same.⁹ When nevertheless the Turkish invasion started Britain called a meeting of the guarantors. Greece rejected the idea until the military government had collapsed; when this had happened there followed the two conferences at Geneva. At the second of these Callaghan, infuriated by the behaviour of his Turkish counterpart, strongly urged Kissinger to join in making contingency plans case the Turkish army moved to enlarge its existing bridgehead. Kissinger refused and told Callaghan that he would 'react very strongly against any further announcement of British military activities.'¹⁰ Although British strength had been increased from 3,000 to 5,500 men and the RAF had flown in extra squadrons, Field Marshal Lord Carver, the Chief of the Defence Staff who had had Cyprus experience in 1964, advised that, 'We should have needed much stronger force we were to face the possibility of hostilities between us and the Turkish armed forces.' It was the same argument against bluffing the Turks which Douglas-Home had used in 1963 when he had overridden Commonwealth Secretary Duncan, Sandys's desire to call in the Navy as a deterrent because 'we have no intention of using our forces even if the Turks should invade [and] I do not think that to bluff would help in this situation.'¹¹ Carver subsequently noted about 1974 that, 'Callaghan was anxious for us to take some action' to deter the Turks; but that there was 'little action we could take which held out reasonable prospects of success.'¹² Thus the second Turkish advance took place and a third of Cyprus was occupied before the declaration of a cease-fire.

As the RAF was evacuating 3,000 Britons from the island, about 24,000 Greek and Turkish Cypriots were taking refuge in the Akrotiri and Dhekalia base areas. During the fighting for Famagusta there was a tense confrontation between Turkish and British armour on the border of Dhekalia, which finally resulted in a Turkish withdrawal. With the fighting over there was a controversial decision for the British Government to take: whether to permit the Turkish Cypriot refugees on the Akrotiri base to be moved to Turkey, which meant that they could go to North Cyprus where many of them took over properties that belonged to Greek Cypriots. It could seem like condoning partition. There was a row in the British Cabinet on 23 January 1975 with Barbara Castle, a long-time supporter of the Greek position on Cyprus, challenging Callaghan's decision to let the Turkish Cypriots go, which he defended on humanitarian grounds, saying that it would be inexcusable to use these refugees as pawns in trying to force a settlement. Mrs Castle demanded whether Greek Cypriot refugees did not also have such grounds, to which the Foreign Secretary allegedly said that the British action would influence the Turks to treat Greek Cypriots reasonably.¹³ The House of Commons Select Committee, having heard

Callaghan's reasons described his decision as an 'error of judgement' contributing to the de facto partition of the island.¹⁴

When the Foreign Affairs Committee looked at the Cyprus situation in 1987 Lady Young, the Foreign Office Minister of State, defining British interests in Cyprus said that 'our first British interest is in the sovereign base areas and the associated retained sites, which include the British East Mediterranean relay station.' In 1960 there were thirty-one retained sites and in addition six training areas; twelve of these sites were lost as the result of the Turkish occupation and since then the British have relinquished others. But there remain, for example, the very important electronic interception station in the Troodos mountains and the powerful early-warning radar on Mount Olympus and there are other significant sites at Cape Kiti, Cape Greco and near Zyghi. In their book The Cyprus Conspiracy Brendan O'Malley and Ian Craig, citing American Government sources, say that in addition to receiving, under the UKUSA of 1947, the product of British intelligence work on Cyprus the Americans also managed to keep up some monitoring and communications activities of their own on Cyprus without specific permission after independence.¹⁵

Although AKEL, the Communist party, which enjoys at the time of writing plurality, albeit a very narrow one, in the Cyprus House of Representatives, has all along been committed to the bases going, and although from time to time there have been neuralgic points such as the opposition to British military exercises in the area of Akamas in 1997 and the more recent protests against the new masts being raised at Akrotiri, no large scale campaign has ever been launched against them.

There is a major communications centre at Episkopi and, though 9 Signal regiment at Ayios Nikolaos in Dhekalia is designated as an Army unit, we know from a famous espionage trial that it is the sponsored outpost of GCHQ Cheltenham and has staff from all Services. It monitors the Middle East on behalf of GCHQ, the Cabinet Office in Whitehall and the American National Security Agency. It has been described as the 'traffic line for sensitive material gathered from US and NATO bases in Turkey and adjacent countries.'¹⁶ Also the American U2 planes surveying the maintenance of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement (and also, no doubt much else) use Akrotiri. There are training exercises for the Army and RAF. The fact that the bases are what the Ministry of Defence calls 'up-threat to the Middle East' has given Britain and, through Britain, her allies a staging and listening area directly adjacent to a region that remains highly critical despite the end of the cold war. Britain was very glad to have this facility during the Lebanese hostage crisis, the Gulf War and, now, with the war against terrorism.

Britain has always insisted that it would be inaccurate to describe her

possession of the sovereign base areas as her only interest in the island. Cyprus is a member of the Commonwealth, she is expected shortly to be a member of the European Union, and there are close human and economic ties between the two countries; one thinks of the large numbers of British tourists every year and the 200,000 Cypriots living in Britain. British policy may try to be even-handed as between the two communities but this concept is inevitably under strain because since 1964, in keeping with the rest of the international community except Turkey Britain has recognised the Greek Cypriot Government as the legitimate government of the whole island. This is a matter which Mr Denktash, on behalf of the Turkish Cypriots, has always contested. In participating in drawing up the resolutions of the UN Security Council Britain has continued to define the desired result as a bizonal, bicomunal federation, while Mr Denktash has for the last few years strayed outside what used to be a common starting point.

The present writer was told when he led a Chatham House delegation to Ankara in 1988 that Greek Cypriots ought to realise that Rauf Denktash was the or advocate of a federation on the Turkish side, that Turkey much preferred confederation and that Greek Cypriots should consequently settle with Denktash while he was still there. Yet for the last few years, Denktash has himself been demanding confederation, involving the prior recognition of the 'TRNC' as a sovereign state, although he avoided making acceptance of this a precondition for holding the latest round of talks with President Clerides. Britain's position has been that of the Security Council. It was indeed Britain who drafted and secured the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 541 of 1983, which deplored the proclamation of the 'TRNC' as a separate state and declared it legally invalid. Therefore in a broad sense British policy might be said to have remained in this central issue on the side of the Greek Cypriots.

On some specific issues, such as the ordering of S-300 missiles from Russia and Greek Cypriot efforts to isolate Turkish Cypriots from international commerce and contacts, forcing them into ever-more exclusive dependence on Turkey, British pressure has been the other way. Although there is no formal contact with the 'TRNC', the British High Commission maintains working level contacts with Turkish Cypriots and it remains British policy to continue to trade with them. Two paragraphs in the recent resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that were addressed to both communities seem particularly to reflect British attitudes. They are the one that calls on the Greek and Turkish Cypriots 'to avoid getting stalled on the terminology to be used as regards the form of the future solution and to concentrate on concrete political issues'; and the other that calls on both 'to refrain from using negative rhetoric when referring to the other community and from educating their children in a way that could increase hatred and distrust towards them.' An important non-governmental organisation, the 'Friends of

Cyprus' has called particular attention to this last point and is advocating the revision of text-books on both sides.¹⁷ The British High Commission has been among several bodies which have sponsored bicomunal meetings, but these are liable to suffer from wilful obstruction, often at the last minute and usually from the Turkish Cypriot side.

Quite serious deadlines are now approaching relating to accession to the European Union. While leaving no doubt that Britain would much prefer Cyprus in as a united island, she supports the Helsinki Council conclusions that such a political settlement is not a prerequisite. That means that unless the Clerides- Denktash talks made real progress, and unless a real drive can then be put behind discussion of Turkish Cypriot participation in EU membership, each of the fifteen present members will in 2003 be faced with the decision whether to admit a member one-third of whose territory is under foreign occupation. Or, to put it a different way, both the EU and Turkey are beginning to feel the onrush of a highly disagreeable confrontation. There is an increasing awareness of this timetable and thus increased awareness in Britain of the Cyprus problem. Everyone of course is hoping that Turkey, wishing to improve her own chances of future membership, will seek to avoid these dangers and that the current negotiations will be a reflection of this.

Quite apart from avoiding hostility between the EU and Turkey, there are, in the British estimation, major positive advantages in having a Cyprus settlement that is sealed by supranational authority. As the result of the attempts to reassure the Turkish Cypriots that their future is being taken care of, successive UN non-papers and sets of ideas have proposed institutional arrangements at the federal level that seem as complicated and in some respects more so as the 1960 arrangements they are intended to supersede. In 1987 the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee remarked that Perez de Cuellar's framework introduced even more checks and balances than existed in 1960¹⁸ and much the same could be said of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's later version. In the light of this the best course would seem to be to limit the powers of the central government as sharply as is compatible with the existence of a single sovereign state. It is true enough that there may well be an economic price to be paid, as Dr Andreas Theophanous shows, in his valuable analysis, The Political Economy of a Federal Cyprus, for a 'loose federation.'¹⁹ But, as he also says, it may be worthwhile, always provided that there is a federation rather than a confederation. However slimmed down the powers reserved to the centre may be, they should bite directly on all citizens of Cyprus.²⁰ The important assistance that the EU dimension brings to this debate is that many of the decisions which would before have had to be made at the federal *level* would in future be made in Brussels. But, of course, the internal settlement would have to ensure that the institutions as a whole would ensure the supremacy of European

law. And if the Turkish Cypriots are to be brought aboard it will be essential that they be guaranteed a visible and convincing role in Cyprus's presence at Brussels, more especially as they will be the main, perhaps the only, recipient of regional and structural funds.

As far as Britain is concerned, it is entirely in her interest to promote a united Cyprus in the EU and it is her policy not to allow a Turkish *veto* of Cypriot membership. Since it is the Republic of Cyprus which is negotiating and by definition the Republic does not include the Sovereign Base Areas, current British policy is that these should remain, as they presently are, outside the Europe Union. But Cyprus has been assured that steps will be taken to avoid Cypriot citizens losing any privileges thereby. For how long this situation can continue will in practice largely depend on the tolerance of the Cypriot people and the hard-headed calculations they in future make as to what would contribute to the stabil of the new order.

Notes

1. PRO: FO 371/168985 CO 1015/428G, 28 December 1963.
2. PRO: PREM 11/4139, 27 December 1963. Keith Kyle, 'Britain and Cyprus in 1963' in *Friends of Cyprus Report No. 37* (Spring 1994), pp. 10-12.
3. Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1974-1976* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981 p.292.
4. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 1986-1987 on *Cyprus*, Appendix I Report from the Select Committee on Cyprus, Session 1975-1976, p. 98.
5. HC Foreign Affairs Committee, Appendix 1 op.cit., pp. 117-118.
6. Brendon O'Malley and Ian Craig, *The Cyprus Conspiracy. America, Espionage and the Turkish Invasion* (I. B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 183-4. The British documents for 1974 will not be available until 2005. O'Malley and Craig rely at this point primarily on the evidence Lord McNally, who was then political adviser to James Callaghan.
7. One technical improvement in the British performance between the crisis of 1963 1964 and that of 1974 was that in the interim the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office had merged, so that Cyprus, Greece and Turkey were now handled by one department.

8. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1982), pp. 1190-1193.
9. James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (Collins, 1987), p.341.
10. Callaghan, op.cit., p. 352. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), pp. 210-214. O'Malley and Craig, op.cit., pp. 210-212.
11. PRO: FO 371/168983, 30 December 1963.
12. Field Marshal Lord Carver, 'Peacekeeping in Cyprus' in John Koumoulides (ed) *Cyprus in Transition 1960-1985* (Trigraph, 1986), p. 37.
13. Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1974-1976* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 292.
14. HC Foreign Affairs Committee 1986-1987, Appendix I Select Committee on Cyprus 1975-1976, p. 112.
15. O'Malley and Craig, op.cit, pp. 80-85, 142-143, 228-229. The authors cite US State Department papers 79 2958, 'Guidelines for Policy and Operations, Cyprus', September 1962, Lyndon Johnson Library, December 1963-1967, and US House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, *US Military Installations and Objectives in the Eastern Mediterranean*, 1977.
16. Jeffrey T. Richelson and Desmond Bell, *The Ties That Bind* (Allen and Unwin, 1985). Rosamund M. Thomas, *Espionage and Secrecy* (Routledge, 1991).
17. Mary Southcott, 'History Textbooks. Truth and Reconciliation', Niyazi Kizilyurek, 'National Memory and Turkish-Cypriot Textbooks', Loris Koullapis, 'The History Lesson in the Greek Cypriot Education System', and Ulus Irkad, 'Historical Distortions Biasing Books', in *Friends of Cyprus Report No. 43* (Autumn 2000), pp. 11-20.
18. HC Foreign Affairs Committee, *Cyprus* (1986-1987), paras 102-105, pp. xxvii-xxviii.
19. Andreas Theophanous, *The Political Economy of a Federal Cyprus* (Intercollege Press, 1996).
20. But it is important not to get too hung up on names. The Confederation of Switzerland, for instance, is by this definition a federation.