
Timing is Almost Everything: Obstructionist Leadership, Cypriot Style

ROBERT I. ROTBERG

Positive leadership consists of navigating toward well-conceived goals, mobilizing followers and constituents to support and legitimate those goals, and realistically appraising how best to surmount obstacles to the achievement of such goals. Another critical skill is knowing how effectively to subordinate intermediate goals to the accomplishment of larger objectives. Likewise, a sense of timing is essential, especially in situations where leaders are compelled to attain their goals through bargaining, negotiating, or coalition-building.

Kemal Atatürk, a consummate leader and the father of modern Turkey, appreciated how important an acute sense of timing could be in pursuit of larger national objectives. Encouraged by chauvinists among his Turkish compatriots before the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 with France and Britain, Atatürk, for example, could easily have demanded and fought for control over the Ottoman province of Mosul and its oil. Turkish irredentism would have welcomed such claims, and Atatürk's already heightened post-World War I popularity would have soared. But he resisted such short-term political rewards in order to seek stronger ties with Europe. He knew that the larger aim of modernizing Turkey could only be achieved with Western backing; winning that support meant sacrificing some parts of what could be construed as the new Turkey's national interest. Doing so also demonstrated an acute strategic sense of which policies would prove most sustainable in the tumultuous and quixotic months after the end of the war and before the conclusion of a permanent peace.

*Robert I. Rotberg is director of the Program on Intrastate Conflict at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, adjunct professor at the Kennedy School, and president of the World Peace Foundation. He is the author of *Cyprus after Annan: Next Steps Toward a Solution*; also *Cyprus 2000: Divided or Federal*; and, most recently, *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*. Rotberg was academic vice president of Tufts University.*

Atatürk's standing in the minds and hearts of Turks was not unassailable. Although he had a broad swath of civilian support and commanded loyal troops, there were strong opposition politicians, reluctant traditionalists, and envious comrades to win over and to fear. Atatürk was by far a first among equals, but he was not yet an icon. His charisma existed, but all parts of the electorate, especially in Istanbul, were not as yet persuaded. Thus, the order of declarations and actions was critical, as were the decisions to attack or to defend. Choosing the right objectives and the best sequence for attaining them constituted effective leadership.

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Rauf Denktash, president of the tiny Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC), which is recognized only by Turkey, revered Atatürk's leadership model, but he himself has failed to learn the final lesson—knowing when to strike a deal and when to declare victory.

Denktash demonstrated a high order of leadership skills from 1960 through mid-2002. He mobilized his followers to resist Greek Cypriot attempts to marginalize and terrorize them, as well as to deprive them of a lasting place on the section of the island that they call home. He marshaled mainland Turkish support in the form of massive loans from the Turkish government. He gradually built up his own status from that of a pasha of a minor, easily ignored, satrapy into a formidable, if unrecognized, world statesman. He molded and strengthened the TRNC and, despite easily derided pretensions, won its acceptance as an entity that could not be ignored. Throughout the 14-month United Nations-brokered negotiations in 2002-2003, Denktash was accorded effectively equal status with President Clerides of the Republic of Cyprus (South Cyprus).

Denktash, moreover, is a formidable negotiator, much to the UN's exasperation. He put forward demands in the 1980s that were later granted by the UN and South Cyprus, but by the time that each was met, new demands superseded the old. As he gained an advantage, he continued to seek further advantage. Even though international legal authority for the island rested with the Republic of Cyprus, the TRNC, with Denktash at the helm, was able to carve out more and more local and international space for itself. Throughout it all, Denktash was emboldened by the steady support of the Turkish army.

Denktash's final test of consummate leadership came in this century, however, when the dynamics of mainland Turkish politics suddenly changed just as South Cyprus was set to enter the European Union (EU). An abrupt political realignment in Turkey transformed North Cyprus from a local jousting object into a severe obstacle to the achievement of far-reaching U.S.-EU diplomatic and

strategic objectives. Reunifying Cyprus, North and South, became a much more urgent goal for Ankara, Athens, Brussels, London, and Washington than it had been in the past. But, in 2002-2003, and again this year, with the UN determined to help put the Humpty Dumpty of Cyprus back together, Denktash persisted repeatedly in defying the UN, the EU, and the United States. He even defied the government of Turkey, his ultimate paymaster, and instead relied upon nationalist appeals to its military leadership. Ultimately, Denktash's intransigence forfeited a possible Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, the goodwill of the big powers, and a positive legacy for himself and his tiny polity. And all for what?

Cyprus, fought over during and before Alexander's era, was an outlying province of Venice from the late fifteenth century through the late sixteenth century, when Ottoman forces laid siege to Nicosia and Famagusta. The Ottoman Empire controlled the island until 1878, when it ceded Cyprus to Britain, an annexation formalized in 1914. Greek Orthodoxy, strong under Ottoman rule, flourished under the Empire. So did a local version of Islam; both Greek and Turkish languages persisted under the Crown, while English became the tongue of those of both backgrounds who sought preferment in the professions or in the British administrative service on the island. Most important of all, Turkish and Greek Cypriots cohabited. Segregation was not the rule, although farming villages were often monolingual. Yet Turkish Cypriots lived in the Paphos region in the southwest, along the south coast in the cities (such as Limassol), and throughout Nicosia when it was a single municipality. To be an educated Cypriot under the Crown meant a secondary schooling in an English-medium institution, an ability to speak Greek even if one were of Turkish-speaking descent (Greek speakers were far more numerous on the island), and further training in London as much as in Athens and more than in Istanbul or Ankara. The common language, the common law, an inkling of representative democracy, and perceived Europeanness were fundamental to a twentieth century Cypriot intimation of proto-nationhood.

Cyprus under the Crown also remained predominantly agricultural. Belonging and identity formation started in the villages, where the Church in the twentieth century grew unusually powerful. *Enosis* (union with Greece) became first a spiritual dream and later a political strategy of the Church and military rulers in Greece itself. It provided one path to post-imperial independence and a sure method of freeing Greek-speaking Cyprus from the long-held fear of being

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recaptured by post-Ottoman Turkey. Achieving such objectives would also boost the power of the Orthodox Church; beginning in the 1950s, Archbishop Makarios, a temporal and religious leader, sought to control the political and economic future of the island. Makarios saw himself as a freedom fighter, but he was a power-maximizer for the Hellenic cause, for the Church, and for himself.

After India's independence in 1947, the dismantling of the British Empire proceeded apace. By 1960, after five years of Greek Cypriot and Greek-mainland agitation, violence fomented by Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Agoniston (EOKA), or the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters, and attacks by EOKA against Turkish Cypriots (there was a Turkish-speaking terrorist movement as well, but most leaders on the Turkish Cypriot side sought *taksim*, or partition, not independence), Britain opted for a studied withdrawal from the administration of the island.

The Republic of Cyprus came into being with provisions for a permanent Greek-speaking president (Makarios) and a Turkish-speaking vice president. In order to preserve its language, culture, heritage, and political saliency, the Turkish Cypriot minority was intended to have a veto over legislation and budgets. According to the 1960 independence agreement, Britain, Greece, and Turkey were guarantors of the new constitution, so as to protect the rights of the minority from being trampled. *Enosis* and *taksim* were specifically forbidden.

This carefully constructed, imposed, quasi-democratic arrangement never worked. By late 1963, it was fully evident that Greek Cypriot leadership wanted to subject Turkish Cypriots to the will of the Greek-speaking majority. The drive for *enosis* continued. The presidency became more powerful. Ethnic cleansing became prevalent during early 1964. The UN was compelled to send its first peacekeeping mission to Cyprus in that year in order to protect Turkish Cypriots who had gathered in Turkish-speaking enclaves north of what became the Green Line across the northern half of the island.

The island's people were more or less already separated (where once they had been integrated) when Nicos Sampson, a guerrilla fighter and publisher, forcibly ousted Makarios in 1974 with help from a mainland Greece-backed military operation. Turkish troops, no longer restrained by the United States' pleas and promises, crossed the waters from the Turkish mainland to prevent Cyprus from joining Greece and to protect their Turkish co-speakers and co-religionists from being swept into the Greek maw. Ultimately, about 18 percent of the islanders came to control nearly 38 percent of the land of the territory of the Republic, backed by 35,000 Turkish soldiers. Greek-speakers fled south from the North; the remaining Turkish-speakers fled the South and went north. The Green Line demarcated Greek Cypriot- and Turkish-controlled territory; only very occasional border incidents have since challenged the mostly peaceful *de facto* partition of the island.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Rauf Denkash led Turkish Cypriot resistance

against Greek Cypriot assertions of hegemony and against the continued legitimacy of the 1960 Republic of Cyprus. The TRNC developed slowly and finally emerged into its contemporary form in 1983. Ever since, Denktash has told almost everyone who cared to ask—the UN, the Great Powers, Turkey, Greece, and South Cyprus—that in order to prevent a recrudescence of the atrocities of the 1960s, the TRNC would never agree to put itself under a Greek Cypriot majority on the island. In order to establish the equal sovereignty of the Turkish-speaking part of the island, he demanded recognition before negotiation. The official mantra was bi-zonal and bi-communal. Denktash would rather see North Cyprus annexed to Turkey than fail to be recognized a legitimate polity. Since Greek Cypriots always insisted that they had been invaded and that a large part of their territory and their island-wide authority had been snatched by Turkish force, Denktash's demands were impossible to entertain. How could the circle be squared?

By mid-2002 a reasonably satisfactory method had been found to divide the circle into segments for each side. After very long and patient Track I negotiations brokered by the UN's special envoy, and after equally laborious Track II discussions over several years among politically prominent and well-informed Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, the major details of a settlement became apparent. The two parts of Cyprus (usually referred to as entities or polities, but not as states so as to avoid bruising Greek Cypriot sensitivities) would come together to compose a United Cyprus Republic. The two component entities would retain control over internal affairs, internal education, local policing, and local budgets and taxes.

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The central government would control foreign affairs and create a central banking system. There would also be a central judicial system.

This governmental edifice would be run from the center by a legislative lower house of assembly whose 48 members would be elected roughly on the basis of population. That is, Greek-speakers, comprising 80 percent of the island's population, would have nearly proportional representation in the seats of the legislature. The upper house, or senate, would be comprised of equal numbers of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, and exercise a veto over legislation. The executive authority on the island was to be a presidential council of six persons, no fewer than two of whom would come from the North. The chair would rotate every 10 months.

Three issues of enormous contention arose during the Track I and Track II discussions. They were: the extent of territorial exchanges, the size of population transfers among the islanders, and the right of return of persons displaced by the

war of 1974. Briefly, it appeared to make negotiating sense that the Turkish Cypriots, having controlled 38 percent of the island since 1974, would return to the South approximately nine percent of their territory. A number of Greek-speakers would be permitted to move north, even into the territory of the Turkish-speaking entity. But their numbers would be limited and regulated.

By October 2002, just before Denktash had a successful heart bypass operation, a deal North Cyprus could accept seemed to be in place. The agreement called for just enough separation and autonomy to dampen any Turkish Cypriot fears that they would again be submerged under a Greek-speaking tide. Moreover, since South Cyprus in 2004 was at least seven times wealthier than North Cyprus, per capita, Turkish Cypriots stood to prosper under the proposed new arrangements. Indeed, since the entire island (or South Cyprus alone) in 2002 was formally accepted into the European Union, the potential carrot of economic assistance from the EU to North Cyprus was a further incentive to forge an agreement.

When the UN presented its elaborate "Basis for Agreement on a Comprehensive Settlement of the Cyprus Problem" in November 2002, Denktash and President Clerides of South Cyprus were asked effectively to accept all of its

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many conditions. In the years before, Clerides had always appeared more ready than Denktash to compromise and to take political risks. He reckoned that the reunification of Cyprus on "reasonable" terms would be positive for South Cyprus, as well as for the entire island. Many observers felt that because Clerides and Denktash had once served together as prosecutors in the British colonial administration, and knew each other well, their old friendship would be conducive to a settlement. Indeed, when they suddenly started dining together in late 2001, it had seemed that long-standing ties would foster agreement. But Clerides never

underestimated Denktash's desire to control the result; he knew Denktash would never bargain away a separate position for Turkish-speaking Cyprus.

In response to the UN call to accept its plan as a blueprint for reunification, both Clerides and Denktash agreed to negotiate. But those negotiations were largely desultory since Denktash continued to resist the UN's terms well into March 2003, even after Secretary-General Annan went to the island and informed both sides to take an amended version of the "Basis" or leave it.

Denktash had still not achieved prior recognition of TRNC as a sovereign entity. Nor, it was clear, was he ever going to achieve it, no matter how hard he

bargained with the UN and South Cyprus. Both North and South naturally sought more or less territory, fewer or more exchanges of people, and also contested how many Greek-speakers could live (and vote) in the North. Then there was the need to agree upon the number of settlers from the Turkish mainland who could and would be regarded as citizens of the Turkish-speaking entity.

These have all been important considerations since March 2003, when Annan told Denktash and the world that Denktash's refusal to bargain had caused the negotiating effort to fail. Annan has understandably been reluctant to reengage the Cyprus issue but, early this year, he received assurances from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey that pressure would be put on Denktash to be more accommodating. Indeed, there appeared to have been an implicit promise by Erdogan that reunifying Cyprus in accord with the Annan Plan was perfectly acceptable to him and to his overwhelmingly dominant political party in Turkey. Erdogan implied, too, that he had overcome opposition from the Turkish armed forces, long an ally of Denktash.

Denktash's long-time ties to right-wing Turkish politicians and generals had been undermined in 2002, when the Turkish economy faltered and new elections were necessary. A few months later, in November, Erdogan's Development and Justice Party (AKP) annihilated the myriad changing, but tightly-linked, political forces that had governed Turkey since World War II.

In early 2003, in Cyprus, the parlous state of the North's economy and Denktash's demonstrated refusal to accept the Annan Plan had also led to vast demonstrations in North Cyprus. About a third to a half (the number is in dispute) of the total population of North Cyprus, and a clear majority of all Cypriot-born Turkish Cypriots, protested vociferously against Denktash's leadership. They held rallies in Nicosia and marched in the streets. They demanded Denktash's resignation. The left-leaning parties in North Cyprus led the protestors and, with an unprecedented surge of educated popular opinion at their back, urged Denktash to accept the UN plan. The protests were noted, especially in Turkey.

In addition, at the end of 2003, Turkish Cypriots came together to vote for seats in the TRNC parliament. Denktash's opponents won a slightly higher percentage of the popular vote than those who supported him, but the 50 seats in the legislature were perfectly split, with each side obtaining 25 seats. A new coalition government composed of a party led by Denktash's chief opponent and another led by Denktash's son was created, leaving the opposition technically in charge of governmental affairs but Denktash still in command of the North Cyprus negotiating team.

Mainland Turkish attitudes toward the Cyprus question shifted significantly at the beginning of 2004, partially in direct response to the anti-Denktash sentiment demonstrated in the election. Moreover, Erdogan's parliamentary majority and national legitimacy remained unchallenged on the mainland; U.S.,

British, and EU pressure on Erdogan became more potent; and the EU strongly intimated that Erdogan's desire to take Turkey into the EU could only be realized if Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004 as a unified island under a single international sovereignty, for which the Annan Plan provided. Erdogan, like Atatürk, wants Turkey to be regarded as a part of Europe, not an Asian or Middle Eastern outpost, estranged from the West.

Despite the AKP's Islamist heritage, Erdogan and the AKP are determinedly modernist. Unlike other Turkish governments since 1974, they are less

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impressed by Denktaş than by the opposition, and favorable to a unified Cyprus. Turkey is not particularly worried about Cyprus becoming a security threat to the much larger and militarily potent mainland. In 2004, Erdogan signaled a willingness to sacrifice Denktaş and his demand to be recognized as a president of a sovereign state on the altar of Turkey's larger European and forward-looking goals. After all, Cyprus' Turkish speakers represent but a tiny fraction of Turkey's 67 million inhabitants. Moreover, under the UN plan, Turkey

would remain a guarantor of any agreement, and with its military might could easily intervene to protect Turkish-speaking Cypriots.

Having made those substantial achievements, and having persuaded the South and the UN, over and over again, to come to him, when it finally came time to capitalize on his successes (reminiscent of Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000), he could not or would not take the final step. That was the case in 2002-2003 and again in early 2004. Unofficial visitors to his residency, as well as official representatives from Washington, London, and Brussels, and Secretary-General Annan himself, urged Denktaş in 2002 and 2003 to grasp the mantle of unquestioned leadership. They have done so again in 2004.

However Denktaş, a consummate tactician for so many years, is unable to let go. Even when he was warned that Turkey no longer needed North Cyprus as a bargaining chip with or against Europe, he refused to accept the possibility of being sacrificed for larger, Turkish, national interests. "If the Annan Plan is accepted as it is," Denktaş fulminated in early March, "the price that the Turkish Cypriot people will pay is 'annihilation.'"¹

Despite Denktaş's near electoral defeat and Erdogan's clear, publicly aired preferences for a settlement to the Cyprus crisis, Denktaş has remained implacable in 2004. Each day, during the negotiations, new and old objections to the Annan Plan were raised. At least, that is what Denktaş reported each day to the

press as he emerged from the supposedly secret negotiating sessions with Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos and UN Under Secretary-General Alvaro de Soto.

In March 2004, President Denktash stressed in a news conference after a boisterous visit to Ankara that if the Turkish Cypriot side could not get its way in the negotiation process, it would withdraw and “struggle against” the Annan Plan. He promised to ask Turkish Cypriots to vote “no” in any referendum. Otherwise, he feared that the Turkish-speakers of the island would suffer the fate of the 1960s all over again, with their persecutions and insecurities. “We’re frightened to relive those events,” he told a cheering crowd in Ankara.²

Denktash trotted out all of his old arguments before a cheering crowd in Ankara, saying that “displaying Cyprus as an obstacle in front of Turkey’s EU membership was an outrageous injustice” and that “the Turkish nation should not bow to this trick.”³ This rhetoric is vintage Denktash, intended to rally nationalists in Turkey and to strengthen his bargaining hand against Erdogan as well as Greek Cypriots. By asking for “a solid agreement protecting the rights of the Turkish Cypriot people” he said that a solution was not needed before May 1,⁴ thus defying Annan, the EU, and Erdogan. Denktash also reminded the EU that more time was needed to discuss the issues thoroughly so as to avoid making mistakes.

Denktash also pointed out that “in the event of uniting Cyprus with Greece as its thirteenth island, Turkey’s sea roads would be closed.” Moreover, “displaying Cyprus as an obstacle in front of Turkey’s EU bid was an injustice.” Denktash reiterated that the accession of Cyprus to the European Union was “contrary to international law without Turkey’s EU membership.” He stressed that those “parties who have closed their eyes to illegal practices for forty years, accepted the Greek Cypriot administration as the legal Cyprus government, and closed the doors for conciliation.”⁵

Denktash has been a great champion of Turkish Cypriots. He has won many battles despite limited resources. But his rejection of the Annan Plan in 2003 and his obstructionism in 2004 was, and is, Pyrrhic. As so many would-be autocrats before him discovered (e.g. Ian Smith in Rhodesia, Dirk Mudge in Namibia, Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire/Congo, Raoul Cedras and Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti, Sani Abacha in Nigeria, and Muhammad Omar in Afghanistan), there comes an auspicious moment when unrecognized, unpopular, and/or illegitimate leaders must accommodate or respond to external pres-

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tures and realities. There is a moment in time when it is still possible to make satisfactory arrangements capable of preserving some measure of one's power and authority. Missing that opportune moment often means an abrupt fall, and the loss of all influence.

A king on the local chessboard, Denktash has become an easily traded pawn in a much more critical game. That he could not and would not accept the ultimate weakness of his own position (in 2002, 2003, and 2004) ultimately sullies his own leadership gambit, erodes his constituency base, vitiates the reach of his charisma, and undermines his legacy as a shrewd and effective leader. Knowing when to bend is essential. Timing is a critical component of leadership, through to the end.

Leadership, moreover, remains legitimate only when a leader is widely regarded as being creative on behalf of his people, not himself. Selflessness is expected of leaders, even when that noble bearing is compromised by reality. Denktash's doughty defensive maneuvers on behalf of Turkish Cypriots were for decades seen to be responsive to the people's will and their needs. But ever since the Annan Plan and joining the EU held out the entrancing possibility of prosperity along with reunification and critical safeguards for Turkish-speakers, Denktash's resistance to change has been seen mostly to be self-serving. Denktash is 80, but even at that age he does not wish to see his unquestioned power diminished or his control over the destinies of North Cyprus transferred to the EU and, over time, to his enemies in South Cyprus. So his rear guard arguments against the Annan Plan continued, to the consternation of many, if not most, Turkish Cypriots. Although opinion polls predicted a favorable vote by Turkish Cypriots, he opposed such a "yes" result in the April 24 referendum. To the consternation of Turkey, he did his best to scuttle the UN's and the EU's carefully crafted attempt to reunify Cyprus before May 1, 2004.

On April 24, Denktash's long leadership of the Turkish Cypriot destiny came to a decisive end. Turkish Cypriots overwhelmingly accepted the Annan Plan, thus rejecting Denktash and opting for Europe. Their Greek Cypriot colleagues voted just as strongly against the plan, thus rebuking the UN and its concessions to Turkey and Turkish Cyprus. Nevertheless, South Cyprus enters the European Union, alone, and North Cyprus must now seek whatever reasonable deal it can strike with its island-mates in the south. Denktash leadership, so strong and persuasive for decades, is now bankrupt. Timing is almost everything. ■

NOTES

1 TRNC official daily email newsbrief, March 4, 2004.

2 TRNC official daily email newsbrief, March 17, 2004.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
