
COMMENTARY

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VAROSHA-FAMAGUSTA: HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

Following the two illegal Turkish invasions of Cyprus in 1974 the Turkish army captured Famagusta too, as planned. Varosha is part of the city of Famagusta and was the touristic area of Famagusta. Subsequently, the Turkish army fenced 'Varosha' off and no one was allowed in ever-since, apart from the Turkish army and UN personnel.

The Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit had fully informed the British Government of his invasion plans during their crucial meeting at 10 Downing Street, during the evening of 17th July 1974. Famagusta was included in his plans. This was confirmed by the Joint Intelligence Committee's flash telegram "Secret UK/US eyes only" on 9th of August 1974 to Geneva for James Callaghan, the then Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary at Geneva II.

The historical evidence read:

"...The plan is for a westward drive to a point 5 miles east of Morphou. From there the line would run east to Nicosia where, after capturing the Ledra Palace hotel... Turkish troops would advance up to a line... Following airborne and command operations in the Chatos area, the line would eventually run from the Famagusta Gate along the old Famagusta Road to the Famagusta port. ...The plan is in conformity with what we knew of Turkish planning prior to the intervention. We think the Turks always hoped to secure Famagusta. The area to be taken and held under phase 2 would amount roughly to the 30 per cent of Cyprus territory which Ecevit has spoken about..."

On the 21st April 1978, the then Secretary General of the UN, Austrian Kurt Waldheim, informed the American Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that the Cyprus President, the late Spyros Kyprianou, had rejected the Turkish proposals and suggested that they needed the Turkish side to come up with some inducement to the Greek side and Varosha was a good one, in order to lure the Greek side to negotiate. On the 11th of May 1978 Turkish PM, Bulent Ecevit, in a speech in Bonn (Germany) uttered (albeit lacking sincerity) something to that effect.

On the 19th May 1979 in the second set of guidelines for the negotiators between President Spyros Kyprianou and the Turkish Cypriot leader, late Rauf Denktash, under the chairmanship of Kurt Waldheim, paragraph 5 of those guidelines read:

"5. Priority will be given to reaching agreement of the resettlement of Varosha under U.N. auspices simultaneously with the beginning of the consideration by the interlocutors of the constitutional and territorial aspects of a comprehensive settlement. After agreement on Varosha has been reached it will be implemented without awaiting the outcome of the discussion on other aspects of the Cyprus problem".

However, the aforementioned commitment for the resettlement of Varosha has not been fulfilled by the Turks, to-date.

British position - Sir David Owen

According to the released official British Foreign Office documents during the years 1979/1980 when the Americans supported the idea that the issue of Famagusta/Varosha should be dealt with as a separate issue, the then British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, David Owen (later Lord Owen), disagreed. He supported its inclusion in a “package solution” which was much nearer to the Turkish position.

Turkish position

During the whole of 1980 the Turks demanded recognition. On the 15th November 1980, the then so-called “foreign minister” of the regime of occupation, Kenal Atakol, explained to D. J. Plumbly of the Foreign Office what the Turkish Cypriot side meant by the “return of Varosha”. He confirmed that only the seaside coastline with the hotels was on offer, and this, with the proviso that they would be given recognition of “Ercan” airport.

Argentinian Hugo Gobbi, the then Permanent Representative of the UN Secretary General in Cyprus followed. He told the British Foreign Office that in actual fact Varosha would remain in the hands of the Turkish Cypriots and the Turkish Army.

On 30th December 1980 the Turkish Official in charge of the Cyprus problem in Ankara confirmed to the British Foreign Office that the Turkish side might give a map with the actual size of the Varosha area and stressed emphatically that only Varosha was under consideration and that the old city of Famagusta was not at all included. The Turkish side regarded as first step towards an agreement of the area of each zone.

Following the unilateral declaration of independence on 15th November 1983 by Rauf Denktash, the UN Security Council issued Resolutions 541/1983 and 550/1984 drafted by the British as the penholders for Cyprus at the UN. The latter of which specifically:

“3. Reiterates the call upon all States not to recognize the purported State of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" set up by secessionist acts and calls upon them not to facilitate or in any way assist the aforesaid secessionist entity; 4. Calls upon all States to respect the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, unity and non-alignment of the Republic of Cyprus; 5. Considers attempts to settle any part of Varosha by people other than its inhabitants as inadmissible and calls for the transfer of that area to the administration of the United Nations...”

The return of Varosha came up again with the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) of 1993/94 that followed the rejected so-called “Ghali Ideas” which were in fact drafted by the British Foreign Office following the Security Council Resolution 649/90 which was accepted by the then President of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) George Vasiliou who had accepted the bi-communal bi-zonal federation without such a mandate by the people.

Constitutionalist and adviser for the RoC Dr. Claire Palley in a lengthy opinion regarding the CBMs was categorical for their acceptance and in particular over the issue of Varosha she wrote: “In order to get return of a desert to which its owners are entitled, all other Greek Cypriot refugees are in practice being sacrificed – what used to be called ‘Famagustization of the Cyprus problem’.”

As years went by and the British Government’s stance differed significantly from its own resolutions. The first indication was spotted in a letter to the then Conservative Member of Parliament David Burrowes by the then Prime Minister David Cameron. Having repeated that Britain supports the Security Council

Resolutions he concluded that “it is my belief that a comprehensive solution continues to be the best hope for the settlement of the issue (of Varosha)”.

The same view was simultaneously adopted by the then Secretary General of the UN.

David Cameron’s stance was followed by the then Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Philip Hammond. On 10th of April 2015 he re-iterated that the issue of Famagusta would be solved through a comprehensive settlement and that it was too difficult to be dealt with separately.

On 25th of September 2020, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (its new name since September 2020) in a letter by its Foreign Minister for European Neighbourhood and the Americas Wendy Morton to Sir Roger Gale MP, re-iterated also that :

“... The British Government continues to support a comprehensive and durable settlement of the Cyprus problem... We remain convinced that, at the end, a durable settlement will be the best opportunity for the settlement of complicated matters, including the issue of Varosha”.

Conclusion

Having knowledge of the released British documents over the years up to the most recent releases i.e. 1993/94, I believe that a) Famagusta was always in the Turkish plans during the two invasions, and b) they never meant to return Famagusta as the Greek Cypriots were ironically led to believe since 1974. This was an illusion albeit created by the Americans following the Greek lobby’s insistence for some action but which stumbled on the British disagreement as well as the Turkish ambitions. Kurt Waldheim (and his successors), the British, and foremost the Turks used the “return of Varosha” all these years to lure the Greek side to carry on negotiating but always adding to their demands making that “return” impossible to materialize with more concessions. It was a game of hypocrisy because as Ecevit had also said during his speech in Bonn, ***“The value of that area cannot be measured in percentages. The value of the area of Varosha in financial prospective for the area is equal to half of the island.”***

After 46 years Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots decided to open the area in late 2020 for themselves just as Ecevit had envisaged...

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