

Turkey's New Page With Greece

Where Erdogan and Mitsotakis's lovefest will lead is uncertain

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Publication date: 3 December 2023

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Last Thursday Turkey opened what President Erdogan regarded as [a new page with Greece](#). In [Virgil's "Aeneid"](#) the Trojan priest Laocoön warns, "I fear the Greeks, even when they come bearing gifts." In this case, it is the Greeks who had better beware.

Greek animosity towards Turkey is deep-rooted. From the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 until the Greek War of Independence in 1821, Greece suffered under Turkish rule. Following the collapse of the Ottoman empire after the First World War, the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 ceded areas of Turkey to Britain, France, Greece and Italy. When former Ottoman general Mustafa Kemal landed in Samsun in May 1919, this led to the Turkish War of Independence and the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, which delineated the borders of modern Turkey.

The Lausanne Treaty, which Erdogan [has told Greece](#) needs revision, recognized Britain's annexation of Cyprus and ceded the Aegean islands to Greece, apart from three. Another article restricted the militarisation of four islands.

In 1919, driven by [the Megali Idea](#) of a greater Greece, Greece invaded Anatolia and reached the Sakarya river west of Ankara, where they were driven back by Turkish forces under Mustafa Kemal. A young American journalist, Ernest Hemingway, gave a graphic account of their defeat in 1922 in his short story, "On the Quai at Smyrna." One consequence was [the population exchange](#) between the two countries in 1923.

[The rise of Balkan nationalism](#) and the subsequent upheaval led to the expulsion of several million Muslims, and massacres, deportation and the population exchange led to a considerable reduction in Turkey's Greek, Armenian and Syriac population. During the Second World War, when Turkey was neutral, [a special wealth tax](#) heavily discriminated against the remaining Greeks and Armenians as well as Jews.

Although Turkey had in the Lausanne treaty renounced all claim to Cyprus, in 1955 the British foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd invited both Greece and Turkey to [a conference in London](#), ostensibly on political and defense questions concerning the Eastern Mediterranean, including Cyprus.

As Lloyd explained to the Cabinet, "Throughout the negotiations our aim would bring the Greeks up against the Turkish refusal to accept *enosis* (union with Greece) and so condition them to accept a solution, which would leave sovereignty in our hands."

During the conference Turkish foreign minister Zorlu called Istanbul and told them "a little activity will be useful." The subsequent [pogrom](#) reduced the Greek population of Istanbul from 100,000 to two thousand today. The Turkish tv series, "The Club" (Netflix), is an atmospheric evocation of the period.

When Cyprus became independent in 1960, [the Greek Cypriot Akritas plan](#) was put into operation, which led to conflict between the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities and in 1964 [UN intervention](#).

A Greek-speaking British naval officer, [Martin Packard](#), who worked indefatigably to reconcile the two communities, was reproached by U.S. Under Secretary George Ball: "Very impressive, but you've got it all wrong, son. Hasn't anyone told you our objective here is partition, not reintegration?"

However, in 1974 what U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson had called "one of the most complex problems on earth" was compounded. Turkey finally intervened in response to a coup backed by the Greek military junta with the aim of declaring *enosis*. Turkish forces have since occupied the northern third of the island.

Thirty years later a UN-led plan to reunite the island, the Annan Plan, conspicuously failed. Claire Palley, in [her considerable account](#) "An International Relations Debacle," noted a remark by U.S. diplomat Daniel Fried: "When we were trying to persuade Turkey to allow the passage of our troops through its territory into Northern Iraq, we offered Turkey two incentives, several billion dollars in grants and loans, and Cyprus, in the form of the Annan Plan."

The last of several attempts at reunification failed in 2017 at Crans-Montana in Switzerland in what UN secretary-general António Guterres called “[a historic opportunity](#)” missed. Now Turkey’s position has hardened and Turkey demands a two-state solution instead of a bizonal, bicomunal federation.

In 2015 Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras on his [first official visit](#) to Turkey spoke of his hopes for “a new era” in their relationship, but [Erdogan blamed the Greeks](#) for the two failed rounds of talks. However, [one controversial account](#) puts the blame on the Greek Cypriot side. Be that as it may, the Greek Cypriots have accepted [the UN secretary-general’s proposal](#) for a new envoy.

At [the Israel-Hellenic Forum](#) in June one of the speakers, Professor Kostas Ifantis, noted that Turkey had entered a period of de-escalation, which was confirmed by last Thursday’s meeting in Athens between President Erdogan and the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. In what Reuters termed “[a lovefest](#)” the two sides agreed to reboot relations.

But a note of caution should be sounded. There is a Turkish proverb, “When crossing the bridge, speak nicely to the bear.” Facing local elections in March and with inflation that rivals that of Argentina, Turkey’s president has his back to the wall. Only a year ago, Erdogan embarked on a rant and [threatened Athens](#) with a missile strike. At the same time, it is [a considerable annoyance](#) for him that Greece’s security is underpinned by the United States.

When Erdogan [states](#) “A comprehensive and fair sharing in the eastern Mediterranean is possible,” he has in mind the region’s [hydrocarbon resources](#). Erdogan had hoped for an energy deal with Netanyahu but now with his comments on Israel and support for Hamas that door is [slammed shut](#).

Once again, the focus is on Cyprus, which because of its gas resources and pivotal position could be [a catalyst for change](#).