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Monograph

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THE GREEK-TURKISH FORUM: A PORTRAIT OF A TRACK 1.5 PEACE SUPPORT INITIATIVE

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One of the most exciting developments for those working on trying to resolve conflict has been the emergence of what is called Track 1.5 initiatives. Traditionally, efforts to resolve long-standing disputes between states would be managed by officials sitting across the table from each other in a very formal setting, either openly or in secret. Meanwhile, various non-governmental groups might try to contribute to peace by trying to pressure their governments or by attempting to build up wider public support for a conflict resolution process.

The problem was that these two elements rarely had much contact with each other. Diplomats and politicians felt constrained from acting outside the bounds of their official roles, fearing that they would commit their countries to certain positions. Meanwhile, civil society organisations were rarely accorded a real say in the process.

Track 1.5 efforts were deliberately designed to overcome the split between these two elements. The aim was to draw together people from society at large who were sufficiently well informed on an issue, and had the necessary standing to directly influence government, but who were not constrained by an official position. Such figures would therefore include politicians who did not hold a formal position in the administration: retired senior diplomats and military officers, business leaders, and other figures from the media and academia.

In 1998 I was enormously privileged to become involved with one of the most successful of these efforts: the Greek-Turkish Forum.

Looking back, it is easy to forget how bad relations were between Athens and Ankara at

that point. In the two decades that followed the Turkish military invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the two countries had come close to war on several occasions. The most recent flare-up of tensions had been in 1996, when the nations had come close to blows over a small, uninhabited islet in the eastern Aegean.

It was against this backdrop that a small British charity, the Roberts Centre, which was then being run by a former British diplomat, Jamie Bruce-Lockhart, decided that perhaps something could be done to improve relations. He set out to identify a number of people from the two countries of sufficiently high public standing who might be amenable to face-to-face discussions with a range of counterparts. The end product was an impressive array of figures, including a former deputy foreign minister of Greece, a retired commander of the Turkish Navy, MPs, top professors and some of the most recognisable journalists in both countries.

Having secured participants, the next task was to secure funding. We were enormously fortunate that both the Norwegian and British governments saw the value in this effort and both provided generous support. The next step was to provide a proper administrative basis for the group. I was hired to be the full time co-ordinator, based at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Meanwhile, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) provided the necessary mediation expertise in the form of their then director, Dan Smith. All the while, Jamie Bruce-Lockhart worked behind the scenes with all the partners and participants to make sure it all ran smoothly.

Right from the start, we were fortunate that all the members realised the responsibility on their shoulders. Everyone wanted to make it

work. More to the point, the two governments were willing to throw their support behind it. Both the Greek and Turkish teams had a direct line of communication with political leaders in their respective countries. Everyone knew this, which in turn gave the whole process an air of added seriousness. Ideas generated around the table had a very good chance of falling on the desks of the Greek and Turkish prime ministers. Nevertheless, the members quickly identified some ground rules. The first was that discussions would be confined to bilateral Greek-Turkish issues. The subject of Cyprus would not be brought up. Apart from the fact that it was just too contentious and emotional a topic, it was also understood that the Cyprus Problem was a matter for the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, neither of which was represented in the room.

Secondly, it was also decided that the meetings should not be secret. Secrecy would give rise to accusations that the group was some sort of cabal of worthies seeking to impose solutions over the heads of democratically elected leaders. This was never the case. Equally, however, the group also understood that if it was to have any hope of success, its discussions would have to be confidential. It was therefore decided that the group would put out press releases after its meetings, but that it would not actively seek to appear in the media to discuss its activities in any detail.

Although the Forum got off to a very good start, within six months it faced a huge challenge. In February 1999, the leader of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] – which had been waging a terrorist campaign in Turkey for the past decade and a half – was arrested leaving the Greek Embassy in Kenya. This caused a huge crisis between the two countries. Once again, there was even talk of war. Even now, I remember those days very well. Practically every other group working towards Greek-Turkish reconciliation collapsed. It became just too politically

sensitive to be seen to be promoting peace. However, to their credit, the members of the Forum quickly decided to keep on going with their efforts. If anything, the crisis only served to underline the importance of what they were doing.

Obviously, things had to be managed particularly carefully over the next few months. But, in the end, the Forum's willingness to keep going paid off. By the end of summer that year, relations between Greece and Turkey entered a whole new positive phase following a series of natural disasters that led to an unprecedented outpouring of public goodwill. In this new environment, the Greek-Turkish Forum thrived. The fact that the members had held together through a period of heightened tension served to strengthen their sense of camaraderie and joint purpose. More to the point, it now started to produce more and more confidence building measures (CBMs) between the two countries, ranging from technical proposals to limit the danger of accidental engagements between military forces, through to efforts to promote contacts across a range of political, economic, social, cultural and educational fields.

So, where does the Greek-Turkish Forum stand today? I am pleased to say that it is still going, although my personal involvement ended many years ago. It is perhaps a sign of its standing and the trust built up amongst its members that it now discusses Cyprus, having brought on board participants from the island. Likewise, it no longer stands in the shadows. Its contribution to peace is now publicly recognised. In large part this is also a reflection of the almost unbelievable improvement in relations between Athens and Ankara. While the bilateral territorial problems still exist between the two countries, the level of interaction between the governments and the people is nothing short of extraordinary. I am proud to say that the Greek-Turkish Forum can take some credit for this state of affairs.