



DR. ROBERT U. NAGEL, MS. KATE FIN, MS. JULIA MAENZA
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United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP)

Conflict history

Armed conflict in Cyprus began during the latter stages of British colonial occupation in the 1950's.¹ Greek Cypriot opposition to British colonialism spurred by a desire to unify with the Greek motherland (“*enosis*”) instigated riots and led to a violent insurgency steeped in rhetoric of Greek nationalism. The emergence of this

armed insurgency, led by the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), instigated a parallel Turkish Cypriot movement for *taksim*, or partition.

By 1957, Great Britain, Turkey, and Greece attempted to negotiate a solution. The Zurich and London Agreements and a Treaty of Guarantee granted Cyprus in-



UNFICYP military and police personnel join calls for an end to violence against women and girls in December 2015. / UNFICYP/Juraj Hladky

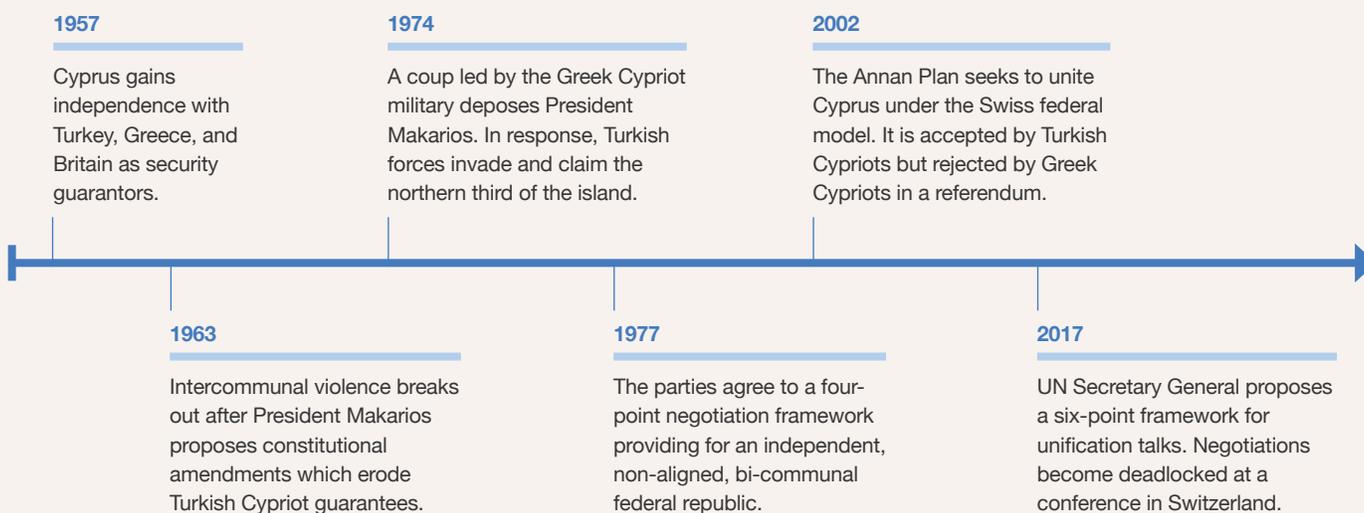
dependence while forbidding the island to unify with another state or be partitioned. Britain, Turkey, and Greece would guarantee the terms of the agreements. Under the new arrangements, Turkish Cypriots were allotted 30 percent of all government posts and 40 percent of military posts, despite representing only 18 percent of the population. Disputes soon emerged over issues such as the establishment of Greek and Turkish municipalities in central cities, taxation, and the structure of the armed forces.²

In 1963, Greek Cypriot President Makarios III proposed 13 amendments designed to streamline the gridlocked government's operations. However, the amendments scrapped many of the constitutional guarantees afforded to Turkish Cypriots, who rejected the proposal. The crisis ushered in a wave of violence that resulted in the deaths of 364 Turkish Cypriots and 174 Greek Cy-

priots, as well as the displacement of a quarter of the Turkish Cypriot population to a few dozen enclaves.³ The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was deployed in 1964 to quell violence and support enclaved communities.

In 1974, the Greek Cypriot National Guard, backed by the mainland Greek junta, led a coup against President Makarios. In response, Turkey launched an invasion codenamed 'Operation Atilla' in July 1974 under its authority as a security guarantor. Turkey claimed the northernmost 36 percent of the island, which became the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The invasion displaced 160,000 Greek Cypriots, about one-third of the community's population.⁴ It was during this period that the parties in conflict agreed to a demarcated modern buffer zone, or "Green Line".

Figure 1: Chronology of Cyprus Dispute



Despite a series of unsuccessful UN-mediated negotiations, both communities have agreed to four basic principles which continue to guide peace talks. These are: (1) Cyprus will be an independent, nonaligned, bicomunal federal republic, (2) each community's territory would be reassessed, (3) freedom of movement, property, and settlement issues would be discussed, and (4) the powers and functions of the central government would be capable of safeguarding the country's unity.⁵

Two episodes in modern history have brought Cyprus close to a solution. A 2002 referendum on reunification garnered Turkish Cypriot support but failed to provide sufficient security guarantees for Greek Cypriots. Likewise, UN-mediated talks came to a halt in 2017 and have not resumed.⁶

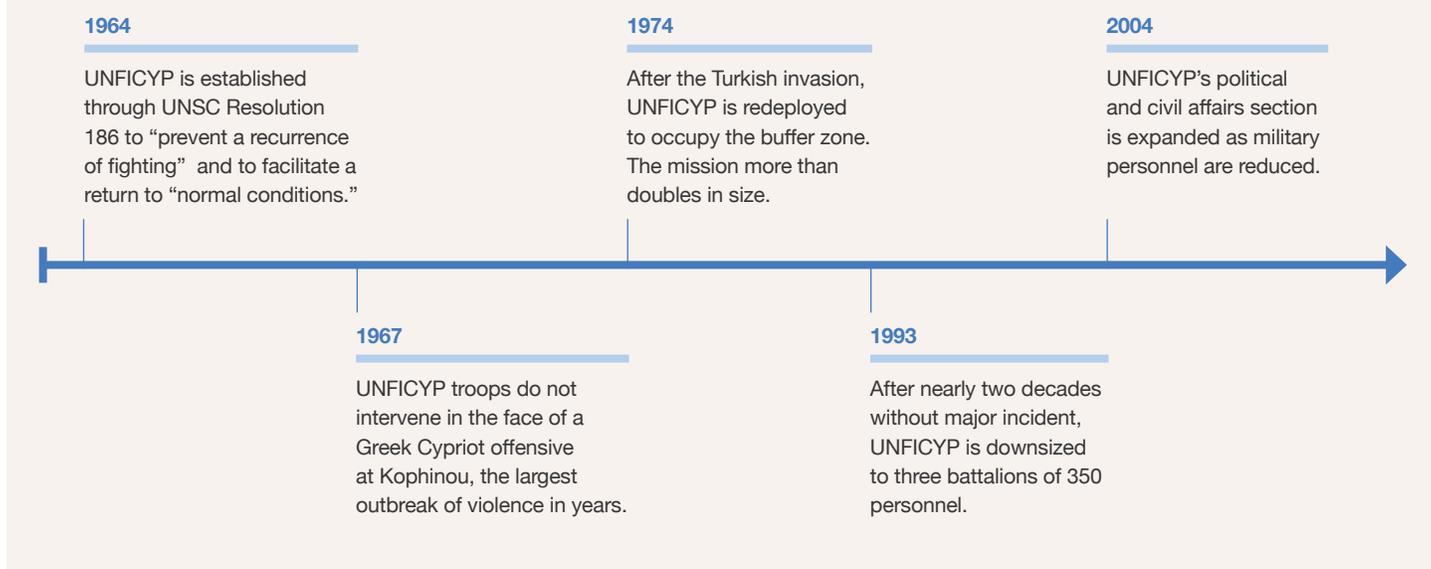
Mission background

The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was first deployed on March 27, 1964 in response to violence catalyzed by Turkish Cypriot opposition to proposed constitutional amendments.

UN Security Council Resolution 186 empowered the mission to “prevent a recurrence of fighting and, as necessary, to contribute to the maintenance and restoration of law and order and a return to normal conditions.” What “law and order” and “normal conditions” meant was unclear, as was how the force would prevent the recurrence of fighting given its lack of ‘offensive’ capabilities.⁷

During this initial phase, the scope of UNFICYP's operational tasks was narrow and focused on preventing active fighting, while a UN mediator was responsible for achieving a political resolution.⁸ Though the UN's rules of engagement permitted the mission to use force only in cases of self-defense, UNFICYP was generally successful at preventing violence during this period. There were only two major outbreaks of violence: in 1964, before the mission was fully operational, and in 1967, when the Greek Cypriot military, the National Guard, began patrolling in Turkish Cypriots enclaves, instigating violence with the Turkish Cypriot community.⁹ UNFICYP also facilitated the elimination of economic restrictions im-

Figure 2: Chronology of UNFICYP



posed by each community on the other.¹⁰ However, the mission was criticized for failing to (1) establish freedom of movement on the island, (2) defortify the Turkish Cypriot enclaves, and (3) preserve the military and political ‘status quo.’¹¹ Limited troop strength, a civilian mandate, and limited administrative capacity hindered the mission’s ability to meet other objectives as well, such as restoring the judiciary’s operation, re-opening public utilities, disarming civilians, or reintegrating the Cypriot police.¹²

The mission entered a new phase in 1974, when a Turkish invasion expelled UNFICYP troops from the northern third of the island, fundamentally changing the political status quo. UNFICYP transformed from an *intra*-state force to an *inter*-state force. In response, the UN more than doubled total deployment to 4,444 from 2,078.¹³ The UNFICYP mandate also expanded to include maintaining the buffer zone, supervising ceasefire lines, and performing humanitarian duties. The mission began to monitor electricity, deliver food, and investigate human rights abuses and missing persons.¹⁴ Following the TRNC’s declaration of indepen-

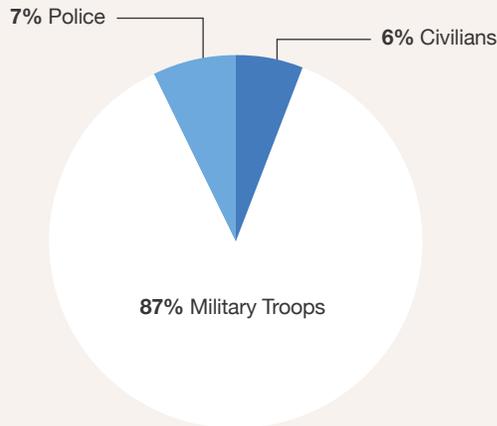
dence in 1983, the mission has served as an intermediary between the two Cypriot governments.

In 1993, Resolution 831 restructured UNFICYP to a strength of three infantry battalions of 350 personnel each, the minimum required to maintain the buffer zone. The move was prompted by severe financial limitations, as the mission was funded through voluntary contributions from member states. Resolution 1217 (1998) established UNFICYP’s civil affairs branch. Civilian personnel are responsible for liaising with the government, serving as interlocutors between the two sides, and delivering humanitarian assistance to minority populations and enclaves. Over time, the balance of power shifted from being concentrated in uniformed contingents to the civilian affairs section as the chasm between both parties’ stances deepened.

Composition

As of November 2020, UNFICYP is composed of 984 personnel. Since its establishment, 183 UNFICYP personnel have died. The mission is led by a civilian

Figure 3: UNFICYP Personnel Composition (November 2020)



Source: [UN Peacekeeping Open Data Portal](#)

diplomat who serves both as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and the Head of Mission. Its primary responsibility is to guard the 180 km-long buffer zone and its ‘civil use areas,’ where around 10,000 people live and/or work.¹⁵ According to UNFICYP, “approximately 1,000 incidents occur within the buffer zone each year, ranging from name-calling to unauthorized use of firearms.”¹⁶ The buffer zone is divided into four sectors:

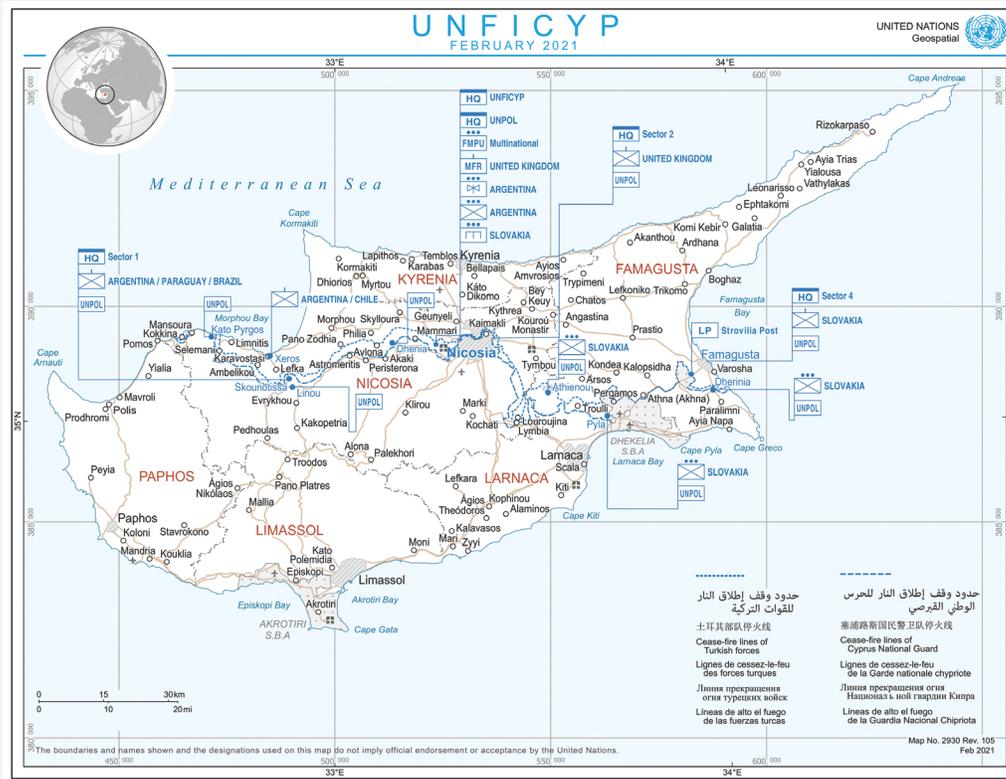
- Sector 1 is a 90 km-long sector staffed by 226 troops primarily from Argentina, as well as from Chile, Paraguay, and Brazil. The contingent conducts mobile patrols from San Martin to Roca camps and controls four permanent patrol bases.¹⁷
- Sector 2 is 30 km long, spanning from the villages of Mammari to Kaimakli. 163 troops operate it from the UK and Northern Ireland.¹⁸
- Sector 3, now defunct, was the area under the control of the Canadian contingent before their withdrawal in 1994.
- Sector 4 is 65 km, spanning from Kaimakli village to the village of Dherinia on the Eastern Coast. It is staffed by 190 Slovakian troops. One platoon is responsible for monitoring Pyla, the only bi-communal village in the buffer zone.¹⁹

UNFICYP has 28 Military Observer Liaison Officers (MOLOs) and Sector Civilian and Military Liaison Officers (SCAMLO).²⁰ In addition to acting as observers, MOLOs facilitate negotiations and liaise between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot forces. SCAMLOs assist the Civil Affairs Team for each sector in performing their daily functions, such as humanitarian relief and facilitating bi-communal events. Finally, the mission benefits from a Mobile Force Reserve of 65 troops which act as a rapid response team at the Force Commander’s disposal.

The mission’s UNPOL personnel are primarily engaged in preserving order in the buffer zone by sanctioning illegal hunting, farming, and construction projects. They also accompany humanitarian convoys. They do not have the powers of arrest and detention.²¹ CIVPOL has distinct responsibilities, as well. They operate UN police spots in high-risk locations, conduct missing person investigations, investigate incidents of violence, and liaise between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot police forces.²² Civil wars scholar Nicholas Sambanis credits CIVPOL with contributing substantially to the Cyprus peace process through highly effective performance of these and other sensitive duties. By meeting with enclaved persons and investigating inter-communal crime, CIVPOL personnel have reduced community tensions and built grassroots support for resolution.²³

Though UNFICYP operates under a policy of strict neutrality, the mission is perceived differently by Cypriots in the north and south. A 2007 poll revealed that Greek Cypriots generally rely more heavily on the mission for protection, with 66 percent of Greek Cypriots respondents reporting that the UN’s presence in Cyprus is “absolutely necessary,” compared to only 51 percent of Turkish Cypriots. The poll also showed that Turkish Cypriots felt substantially more secure than Greek Cy-

Figure 4: UNFICYP Deployment (February 2021)



Source: UN Geospatial Network

priots, likely because of the presence of Turkish troops on the island.²⁴ This dynamic persists to this day.

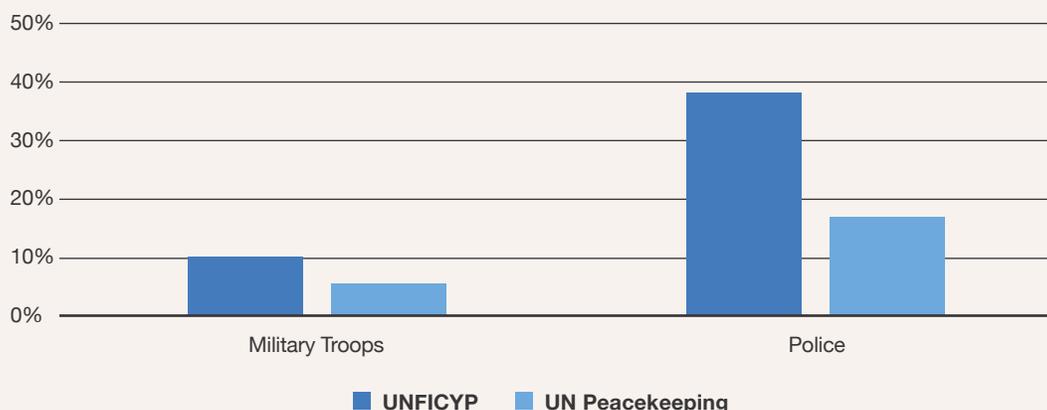
Women, Peace and Security

UNFICYP benefits from a substantial number of women in key leadership positions and uniformed roles. It became the first mission to have all-female leadership in 2019, consisting of Mission Head and SRSB Elizabeth Spehar, Senior Police Advisor Ann-Kristen Kvilekval, and Force Commander Cheryl Pearce. The current team consists of Spehar, Fang Li as Senior Police Advisor, and Major General Ingrid

Gjerde as Force Commander. These appointments represent rapid progress, considering that in 2010, women had not held any senior management positions (D-1 and above).²⁵ Additionally, women made up 9.9 percent of UNFICYP troops and 38.2 percent of police personnel in November 2020.²⁶ Meanwhile, women constituted 41 percent of UNFICYP’s civilian workforce as of August 2020.²⁷ The table below provides a breakdown of women personnel by role and contributing country.

Cyprus performs relatively well on gendered criteria, ranking 31 of 167 countries in the 2019 Women, Peace

Figure 5: Proportion of Female Troops and Police



Source: [UN Peacekeeping Open Data Portal](#)

and Security Index.²⁸ However, both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot women continue to face several challenges and vulnerabilities. First, according to civil society actors human trafficking, both for forced labor and prostitution, is a pervasive issue on the island. Though amendments to anti-trafficking legislation have sought to increase penalties and criminalize the purchase of sexual services from trafficked people, little appears to have changed in practice.²⁹ Second, women are persistently underrepresented in peace negotiations and processes, which have failed to integrate a gender agenda.³⁰ Women's inclusion and applying a gender lens to conflict resolution strategies are key goals that women activists in Cyprus are pursuing. Finally, civil society in both communities is considered weak and underdeveloped. Women's organizations are often underfunded and understaffed.³¹ UNFICYP has worked with numerous representatives from Cypriot civil society to overcome these and other gendered issues. Mission-perpetrated sexual exploitation and abuse do not appear to be a problem. Though rates are difficult to measure due to underreporting, only one allegation against UNFICYP personnel has been reported to the UN since 2015.³²

We conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with uniformed and civilian UNFICYP personnel and civil society actors to examine the gendered impacts on the mission's operational effectiveness. Interviews revealed contradictory viewpoints about the value and impact of UNFICYP's women leadership and women peacekeepers. Many mission representatives and civil society leaders evinced that SRSR Elizabeth Spehar and Major General Cheryl Pearce have had a direct and positive impact on women's inclusion and empowerment both within the mission and in Cypriot society. UNFICYP's relatively numerous women personnel were also frequently credited with improved community relations. Stakeholders expressed that:

- Women's high-level leadership makes the mission more welcoming to women, thus potentially boosting gender diversity;
- Women's leadership helps to challenge stereotypes of who leaders—especially military leaders—can be;

Figure 6: Women’s Representation in UNFICYP

Contributing Country	Number of Women	Women’s Roles
Argentina	21	19 Troops
		2 Staff Officers
Australia	1	1 Staff Officer
Bosnia	5	5 Individual Police
Canada	1	1 Staff Officer
Ghana	1	1 Staff Officer
Hungary	3	3 Staff Officers
India	2	2 Individual Police
Ireland	2	2 Individual Police
Italy	2	2 Individual Police
Jordan	1	1 Individual Police
Lithuania	1	1 Individual Police
Pakistan	2	2 Staff Officers
Paraguay	2	2 Troops
Romania	3	3 Individual Police
Russia	6	2 Staff Officers
		4 Individual Police
Slovakia	27	23 Troops
		3 Individual Police
		1 Staff Officer
Sweden	1	1 Individual Police
Ukraine	1	1 Individual Police
UK	24	22 Troops
		2 Staff Officers

- Women uniformed personnel are ‘role models’ for the local population;
- Women personnel can more effectively communicate with local communities, thereby improving the mission’s overall relations with the local population;
- Women personnel can more readily uncover and respond to women’s unique concerns.

However, not all stakeholders saw ‘added value’ from the mission’s women personnel or did not attribute women’s contributions to their gender. Interviewees also expressed that:

- Women are not inherently better soldiers or police, as they too can and do adopt patriarchal values and behaviors;
- Women are not inherently better equipped to deal with local populations or women; it is a matter of training;
- Improvements in the mission’s relations with local women’s civil society groups were the result of work by gender *experts*, not merely women *personnel*;
- Gender diversity is a *necessary but insufficient* element of mission effectiveness, as diversity of background, education, training, and thought are equally important.

Challenges

UNFICYP faces a series of unique challenges under Cyprus’ political and conflict conditions. Since 2017, when talks between the Republic of Cyprus and TRNC stalled most recently, UNFICYP has experienced escalating assaults on its authority, primarily from the north. The Turkish Cypriot government and Turkish armed forces have challenged the demarcation of decades-long ceasefire lines through repeated construction violations and increased military and police presence along the line since 2018. This has led to “levels of political tension not seen in Cyprus in years.”³³ The TRNC’s decision in October to reopen the beach town of Varosha, which had remained shuttered since the Turkish invasion in 1974, is emblematic of this rising belligerence. Despite condemnation from the international community, the Republic of Cyprus, and UNFICYP³⁴ Varosha remains open. The TRNC’s November 2020 presidential run-offs, in which Ankara-backed hard-liner Ersin Tatar beat moderate incumbent Mustafa Akinci, only

further complicated the prospect of peace. Tatar has publicly insisted upon a two-state solution in opposition to the negotiation principles which have guided peace talks for decades.

The COVID-19 outbreak and accompanying restrictions have also worsened tensions. In July/August 2020, the TRNC barred UNFICYP from accessing territory in the north, allegedly as a public health measure. Additionally, six crossing points along the buffer zone were closed. In response, the mission called for both sides to desist from violating the military status quo, resume free movement of UNFICYP personnel, and increase efforts at diplomacy and cooperation.

Interviews with UNFICYP personnel and leaders uncovered the most significant challenges facing the mission. Among the most commonly-cited challenges were:

- A lack of resources, especially as it pertains to gender programming, COVID-19 response, and support to civil society;
- The growing belligerence of both parties, including their unwillingness to communicate with each other and/or cooperate with the mission;
- Constant, six-month mandate renewals, which exacerbate anxieties amongst Greek Cypriots in particular;
- The prevalence of human trafficking on the island;
- Mission fractionalization in the form of a lack of cooperation and distrust between the civilian, police, and military elements of UNFICYP;
 - In particular, military personnel felt that civil affairs discriminated against and/or condescended to the mission's uniformed components;
- Limited opportunities to interact with local populations as a result of the mandate, which concentrates troop strength in the buffer zone.

Effectiveness

UNFICYP operates in a frozen but fragile conflict context. Its primary responsibility involves monitoring the buffer zone, including regulating increasingly invasive civilian activity such as farming. A 2017 UN Strategic Review of the mission found that while UNFICYP's operating environment was characterized by "contained" military incidents, most stakeholders in Cyprus "attributed the containment of military incidents to the preventive and deterrent role of UNFICYP."³⁵ The authors recommended only minor reductions to military personnel, concluding that a significant drawdown would constitute an unreasonable risk to peace and security. More recently, stagnation on the political front has fostered growing frustration on both sides. "The absence of a resolution of the Cyprus problem," a report of the Secretary General concludes, "is increasingly unsustainable."³⁶

Stakeholder consultations revealed a diversity of opinions on the value and effectiveness of the mission, often split along identity lines. Among the most important findings were that:

- Many stakeholders, especially Turkish Cypriots, see the force as useless and impotent;
- Many stakeholders, especially Greek Cypriots, see the force as a vital security guarantor;
- The mission contributes to the island's already-acute militarization, thereby sometimes *contributing* to feelings of insecurity;
- The mission's role in relaying and rephrasing messages between the two parties is vital;
- There is widespread frustration at the lack of progress on the political front;
- The force's support for Cypriot civil society is impactful, if not robust.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ker-Lindsay, James. *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press, 2011, 13.
- ² *Ibid*, 20.
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- ⁴ Ker-Lindsay, James, “The Cyprus Problem” in *“Frozen Conflicts” in Europe*, ed. Anton Bebler (Berlin: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2015), 21.
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- ⁶ Following a three-day summit in late April 2021, the UN said there was not enough common ground to resume negotiations to break the impasse. Al Jazeera “Cyprus settlement talks found little common ground: UN chief” accessed May 5, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/29/cyprus-settlement-talks-found-little-common-ground-un-chief>.
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- ⁸ *Ibid*, 142.
- ⁹ Evriviades, Marios, and Dmitris Bourantonis. “Peacekeeping and peacemaking: Some lessons from Cyprus.” *International Peacekeeping* 1, no. 4 (1994): 394-412.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 400.
- ¹¹ Nicholas Sambanis. “The United Nations Operation in Cyprus: A new look at the peacekeeping-peacemaking relationship.” *International Peacekeeping* 6, no 1, (1999): 79-108.
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- ¹³ United Nations. Department of Public Information. *The blue helmets: A review of United Nations peace-keeping*. United Nations, Department of Public Information, 1997.
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³⁶ Ibid, §60.

Cover photo: UNFICYP bids farewell to Force Commander. / Photo by: *Luboš Podhorský*



GIWPS Georgetown Institute for
Women, Peace and Security

1412 36th Street, N.W.,
Washington D.C. 20057

giwps.georgetown.edu