

Seeking Opportunities in Crisis Times: Greek Foreign Policy in the Middle East



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Abstract

This paper aims to explore Greece's foreign policy in the Middle East in light of the Greek crisis and the "Arab Spring." Capitalising on its cultural, military and institutional resources, Greece can devise policies with the aim to contribute substantially to conflict resolution in the Middle East, despite its acute economic crisis. This study comes up with three policy proposals whose implementation would not be financially prohibitive and would not exhaust Greece's diplomatic capital: Greece could take a leadership position in addressing the question of piracy in the Horn of Africa, spearhead a campaign for the protection of Christian community rights in the Middle East and undertake a comprehensive institution-building training program in the Arab transition states. These policy measures could help re-establish Greek diplomacy in a region with strong historic, cultural and political links with Greece.

Introduction

Greece and the Middle East have attracted a disproportionate attention of global media and public opinion over the last two years for different reasons. Greece has been undergoing the most severe economic and social crisis of its recent history. The outcome of the Greek crisis is of paramount significance not only for the future of the country, but also for that of the Eurozone and even of the European integration project. The Middle East, on the other hand, has been experiencing a spectacular set of popular revolts and revolutions against authoritarian regimes that were hitherto considered to be impervious to any domestic challenge. The aim of this study is not to explore the structural and contingent reasons of Greece's recent economic crisis or try to identify the reasons of the "Arab Spring." Both the Greek crisis and the "Arab Spring" are still unfolding, and it would be very premature to make any final judgments. On the other hand, Greece's difficult economic condition does not justify its virtual absence from the Middle East, in particular while the latter is going through a transition of historic proportions. While Greece has enjoyed cordial relations with the Arab world for decades, these were left to fade following the end of the Cold War.

Greece's strong diplomatic and economic involvement in Southeastern Europe and its commitment to become part of the hard core of the European integration process coincided with a gradual neglect of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean dimensions of Greek foreign policy. While the consequences of this oversight are increasingly felt in the region, in recent years a clear improvement in relations with Israel has added a significant dimension to Greece's Middle Eastern policy. Several public statements of Greek and Israeli officials at the highest level heralded a new era of close political, diplomatic and economic cooperation. There is no doubt that Greek-Israeli relations have remained at a rather superficial level for decades, and there is clear potential in their development. On the other hand, how to achieve this, without any negative repercussions in Greece's relations with the Arab Middle East and without this to appear as a knee-jerk reaction to the deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations, has remained a puzzle left for Greek diplomacy to solve. Moreover, the discovery of energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean has added a new parameter to the nexus of regional relations. The discovery of significant natural gas fields offshore Israel and Cyprus could promote

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regional cooperation or trigger regional conflict, depending on the policy choices of key regional actors.

Admittedly economic diplomacy is not at the moment a part of the Greek foreign policy toolkit, yet this does not deprive Greece of the ability to make a difference in the Middle East. Capitalising on its cultural, military and institutional capital, Greece can devise policies with the aim to contribute substantially to conflict resolution in the Middle East, facilitate the transition process in the “Arab Spring” states and thus become again a significant regional actor after two decades of virtual absence. Such initiatives could be taken through the European institutional channels, the European Commission, the Union for the Mediterranean, or a bilateral basis with the cooperation of European authorities. This study comes up with three modest policy proposals which would not require the investment of valuable – especially under the current crisis circumstances– political capital and whose implementation would not be financially prohibitive: Greece could claim a leadership position in addressing the question of piracy in the Horn of Africa, spearhead a campaign for the protection of Christian community rights in the Middle East and undertake a comprehensive institution-building training program in the Arab transition states.

Three Policy Proposals

a. Addressing the Piracy Challenge in the Horn of Africa

Since the 1991 collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic and the outbreak of civil war, Somalia has been one of the world’s most unstable regions. Following the failure of the US-led UN peacekeeping campaign to restore food supply and reverse the threat of famine, international interest has escaped the ever deteriorating situation in Somalia. The rise of separatist movements in the north of the country –the declaration of independence of Somaliland and Puntland– has made things only more complicated. Somalia’s sovereignty has in effect disintegrated; it has become the archetypical “failed state.” This has had multifold international consequences, as collapsing Somalia became a Hobbesian model-state,

hotbed of international terrorism and a base of international piracy. Ever since Somalia’s government disintegrated, the sea around the Horn of Africa and large parts of the Arabian Sea have arguably become the most dangerous seaways in the world. While piracy sporadically also affects regions like Western Africa or Southeastern Asia, the disruption that the collapse of law and order in Somalia has brought to international shipping trade has been unprecedented in recent history. Shipping companies often have to hire armed private security personnel, which leads merchant shipping and international law into uncharted territories. International organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) have attempted to regulate and provide guidance regarding this new phenomenon. On the other hand, concerns about potential unintended consequences are evident. This situation in Somalia has led to a continuous, costly and destabilising anarchy which the international community could barely tolerate. According to the *Economist*, it is estimated that every year piracy of the shores of Somalia costs the rest of the world anything between USD 7 and USD 12 billion. This includes extra spending on fuel, as vessels need to circumvent the treacherous waters, and on security, as an increasing number of shipping companies hire their own security firms. In addition, ransom payments over the past five years amounted to USD 400 million. This situation has posed a formidable risk to human life. 62 merchant sailors lost their lives in the past four years due to piracy incidents offshore Somalia, while the number of killed pirates remains unaccounted for.

The sheer cost of piracy has eventually forced the international community to take a more proactive stance, at the United Nations level. According to the 1838/2008 UN Security Council decision, member states with vessels in the region affected by Somali piracy are called to apply military force as a means of repressing acts of piracy. Adopted unanimously on 7 October 2008, it recommends that states commit both naval and air forces to fight this crime. As a response to this call, naval forces of several states have been dispatched with the aim to protect free navigation and free trade in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Sea. According to the stipulations of the UN Security Council resolution, the United States has introduced CTF-151. Twenty countries declared their intention to

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contribute to the force, including South Korea, Denmark, Pakistan, Singapore, New Zealand, Turkey and Australia. Apart from the United States, CTF-151 has been commanded by naval officers from New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore and Turkey.

The European Union also launched its own initiative with the aim to alleviate the impact of piracy and armed robbery on international maritime security and on the economic activities and security of countries in the region. Under the name of European Naval Force Somalia – Operation Atalanta (EU NAVFOR – Atalanta) a task force has been developed within the framework of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and in accordance with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) and International Law. According to its mission statement stated in the European Council 2010/766/CFSP decision of 7 December 2010, EU NAVFOR-Operation Atalanta conducts:

- the protection of vessels of the World Food Programme (WFP) delivering food aid to displaced persons in Somalia; the protection of African Union Mission on Somalia (AMISOM) shipping; the deterrence, prevention and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast;
- the protection of vulnerable shipping off the Somali coast on a case by case basis;
- In addition, Atalanta shall also contribute to the monitoring of fishing activities off the coast of Somalia.

After the launch of EU NAVFOR-Operation Atalanta in December 2008, the operation continues to successfully perform its mission and contributes to improving maritime security off the coast of Somalia and in the Indian Ocean. The Council of the EU has decided to extend the operation until December 2012. Nonetheless, this is nowhere close to the figures necessary to effectively eradicate the phenomenon. In fact, several EU member states appear unwilling to contribute to the operation. There is a clear need, however, for more active involvement of the international community and the European Union, in particular. Despite the existence of international

patrolling missions offshore Somalia, several piracy incidents are still regularly recorded.

Under these provisions Greece has participated in the international mission since its inception through the contribution of one frigate to the EU NAVFOR-Atalanta. Nevertheless, the Greek Ministry of National Defence withdrew the Greek frigate on 28 August 2011, citing the mounting economic crisis as reason. This was said to achieve savings of 24 million Euros. In 2012 one Greek frigate was planned to participate for 60 days every six months. This decision failed to consider the imbalance between the potential to improve Greece's international prestige through its active involvement in the operation and minuscule financial savings, especially given the ability of the Greek Ministry of National Defence to save multi-fold amounts in non-combat-related expenditures.

Despite the recent decision of the Greek government, a cost-benefit analysis of Greece's involvement in EU NAVFOR-Atalanta would clearly highlight that Greece would be better off by upsizing its participation. This crisis provides a rare opportunity for Greece to display its leadership role in the wider Middle East. Greece has one of Europe's most formidable navy fleets and is one of the countries whose economy is most impaired by the current crisis. Hence it could play a substantial role by upsizing its contribution to the task force, taking over administrative duties and undertaking a leading role at a European level. This could comprise a valuable service to global security, trade and economic development, improve Greek prestige on a global basis and would also accrue indirect benefits, as the Greek merchant marine would be among the biggest beneficiaries from the resolution of the current crisis. Moreover, the additional economic burden which would be incurred as a result of this upsizing does not need to fall exclusively on the shoulders of the Greek taxpayer. It is likely that the European Union or other international organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) would be willing to share the cost of the Greek contribution, if the Greek government submitted such a request. In addition, there are EU member states willing to contribute to the eradication of piracy in the Horn of Africa which lack both Greece's financial woes and naval force capacity. Hence they could be interested in financing advanced

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Greek participation under the EU umbrella. Last but not least, Greece's stronger involvement would provide a rare training opportunity for Greek naval forces. This could improve the skills of officers and overall the deterrence capacity of the Greek navy.

Greece's closer involvement would also improve the global standing of the European Union, which is frequently accused of being irrelevant to global developments and of failing to enhance global security at any cost. It would also comprise evidence that Greece's strategic interests are not limited to its immediate neighbourhood but may even extend to the Indian Ocean, if a sector of the Greek economy as critical as shipping is inhibited. Greece's good relations with the Arab world are an additional advantage which can be even further developed. Such an initiative could help Greece's prestige within the Arab world, in particular the Gulf States which both firmly oppose Islamist terrorism and also suffer as a result of the impairment piracy inflicts upon the world economy. Relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia would escape a narrow focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) and energy and extend to regional security. This could also help offset Arab concerns regarding the improvement of Greek-Israeli relations. Greece's status in front of the global emerging powers would also improve. Countries like China, India, Brazil and Russia represent a large percentage of global trade. A large part of this trade is channelled through the Horn of Africa and is thus affected by piracy. A stronger Greek engagement would facilitate free trade between the West, the Middle East, South and East Asia and would thus underline Greece's role as a security provider in the region.

In addition, it will defend the legitimate interests of the country's most dynamic economic sector, the merchant marine. The risks of such an operation are relatively limited as even the most anti-Western regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere have failed to provide overt support for the Somali pirates. By patrolling in Somali waters, it can even protect the rights of Somali fishermen who have suffered in the past both from illegal fishing by international fishing fleets as well as the dumping of toxic waste offshore Somalia by foreign vessels. Both practices have

greatly contributed to a sharp fall of fishing stocks and the impoverishment of Somali fishing communities.

b. Protection of Christian Community Rights

Christian communities in the Middle East have been among the biggest victims of the confrontation between the United States and radical Islamism. While their position was relatively stable under the authoritarian secularist regimes that ruled the Arab Middle East since the 1960s, the rise of radical Islamism, the military involvement of the United States in the region and the legitimacy crisis affecting the Middle Eastern states have destabilised their position. Seen as "the enemy within" by radical Islamists and as a "fifth column" in a "clash of civilisations" context, they have faced rising persecution and pressures. While the state of Middle Eastern Christians has been documented in Western reports, many Christians have appeared reluctant to collaborate with Western NGOs or governments in promoting a liberal reform agenda for their own countries. Being aware of the success of smear campaigns that would present them as collaborators of Western imperialists against the interests of their own countries, thus reinforcing the stereotype of being the "fifth column" in the Arab world, they have often abstained from any involvement in politics. Apathy in issues linked to political reform seems to be the choice of many Christian representatives in the region.

The case of Iraq has been instructive in that respect. Before the 2003 US invasion of the country, Christians were estimated to number between 800,000 and 1.4 million. Less than a decade later, population estimates bring the Christian population down by 400,000 to 600,000. This was a result of a precipitous rise of anti-Christian terrorist acts. In numerous occasions, churches have been bombed, priests and other prominent Christians have been assassinated or kidnapped. Many of these attacks were organised by Al-Qaeda and its subsidiaries. This underlined that fomenting conflict within the Middle Eastern societies would be a substantial feature of Al-Qaeda destabilising policies in the region. The most horrendous terrorist act took place on 31 October 2010, when five Islamist terrorists attacked the Sayidat al-Najat Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad.

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Two priests, 44 worshippers, and seven members of Iraqi security forces were killed. More than 80 persons were injured. The “Islamic State of Iraq,” a terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda in Iraq, claimed responsibility for the attack. Such incidents led to rising insecurity among Iraqi Christians. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians have been displaced to safer areas within their own country or simply fled the country, either to neighbouring Syria or to the West.

Under these circumstances, Christian fears about either the rise of sharia-based regimes or a sharp increase of sectarian violence have often contributed to their taking a neutral position in the “Arab Spring” revolts. Christian involvement in liberal movements has often been handicapped by their successful denigration as “Western imperialist ploys.” Choosing the “lesser evil” of an oppressive but not actively anti-Christian regime appears then to be a rational move. This is evident in countries like Egypt or Syria where uncertainty about the links of post-revolutionary regimes with Islamist political movements and the possible marginalisation of religious communities has played a key role in limiting the involvement of religious communities in the insurgency. The October 2011 incidents of anti-Christian violence in Egypt have highlighted the urgency of the situation as well as the need to develop policies to protect the Christian communities of the Middle East.

This threat of a radical Sunni Islamist post-revolutionary regime has been also carefully played by the Syrian regime which warned of the rise of a sectarian civil war if it loses power. This did not appear to be substantiated. In most of the Arab revolutions religion was not an issue high on the agenda of revolutionaries. This even displeased established Islamist movements which could not claim ownership of the revolution. It is true that the “Arab Spring” has not been an Islamist-driven movement and that radical Islamists –including al-Qaeda– have been caught by surprise. Yet this does not mean that the revolutionary movements in some Arab countries may not acquire an Islamist hue.

Greece enjoys special historic and cultural links with Middle Eastern Christians. The presence of

Orthodox Patriarchates in Damascus,¹ Alexandria and Jerusalem attests to cultural and historic links between Greece and the Middle East. Oriental churches of the Middle East are culturally closer to Orthodoxy and Greece than to any other Christian denomination and European state. While Greek foreign policy has neglected its Middle East perspective and its regional links since the end of the Cold War, it maintains a considerable potential. Cultural diplomacy is a useful tool whose application could be one of the ways to reintroduce Greece in the Middle East. Greece’s membership of the European Union and cultural affinity with the Middle East is a unique combination which underlines the constructive role that Greece could play by building bridges towards the Christian population of the Middle East and advocating their legitimate rights in the context of regime transformation and state-building. Greek engagement should be both short- and medium-term. The alleviation of the refugee crisis in Iraq and Syria is a primary short-term concern. The provision of humanitarian aid to the refugees is a useful starting point, to be followed by diplomatic initiatives at the European level aiming to facilitate their return. In the medium term, special attention should be spent to institution-building in states under transition, so that Christian rights are not compromised. Greece could spearhead European efforts to prevent any discriminatory measures in the new constitutional and legislative orders of the Middle Eastern states which host substantial Christian communities. Given that Islamist political organisations in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” will be given a stronger voice in respect for democratic principles, it is imperative that this would not lead to majoritarian or discriminatory regimes against Christians and other religious communities. This is all the more important as calls for the establishment of sharia-based regimes have been growing in countries with substantial Christian communities such as Egypt. The outcome of the transition in Egypt could function as a bellwether for the whole Middle East, given the substantial size of Egypt’s Coptic minority and mounting pressures for the Islamisation of the state in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution. Contributing to the development of secular foundations of the states or at least non-

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¹ The Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch has been based in Damascus since the Middle Ages.

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discrimination principles is of paramount importance. Moreover, attention should be paid to promote the equitable representation of Christians in bureaucratic positions, in proportion to their demographic strength. Capitalising on its good relations with the Muslim world, Greece can play the role of an honest broker and also help shape a European policy which can address the cultural specificities of the region. It is the only European and Western country which can get involved in Middle Eastern affairs without invoking memories of the "Crusades," a narrative which radical Islamists have time and again masterfully engaged with in order to demonize reformist, pro-Western political and social actors and forestall the proliferation of liberal democratic institutions and human rights in the Middle East. The alleviation of Christian fears regarding the nature of post-revolutionary regimes would greatly contribute to their support for transition and democratic reform. Christian communities could then escape from their current security dilemma, firmly endorse the "Arab Spring" regimes and play a vital role in their consolidation. This would be a substantial contribution to peace-building in the Middle East and help rehabilitate Greek foreign policy to one of its historic focal regions.

c. Helping with Institution-building in the "Arab Spring" transition states

As the "Arab Spring" unfolds, an increasing number of states face the formidable challenge of transition. While several despised old regimes may have collapsed, yet it is by no means certain that transition will be smooth or linear. It will be a Herculean task to replace authoritarian, corrupt and inefficient institutions with institutions that can guide a transition to a more participatory, deliberative and democratic regime. While this transition is a task which can only be owned and realised by the peoples of the Middle Eastern states, European political institutions have to spearhead efforts to provide infrastructural support contributing to institution-building. Such an initiative would be of major importance and is likely to be more successful if it originates from European countries with a greater cultural and historic affinity with the Middle East. Greece could for instance provide crucial

administrative support in the development of efficient electoral mechanisms in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and possibly Libya as soon as interim regimes declare elections. Building up efficient and reliable election mechanisms is of paramount importance in order to allow for the authentic expression of popular will in upcoming elections.

Undoubtedly it is not the whole of Greek administration that can serve as a model. While it is true that large segments of Greek administration could not be considered as paragons of efficiency and transparency, there are certain islands of excellence whose practices could be emulated. One such example is the ombudsman office. The introduction and operation of the Greek ombudsman has been an unqualified success and has addressed the critical question of bureaucratic transparency and responsiveness. Greece has already successfully provided assistance in the establishment of the ombudsman in Turkey. The proliferation of the ombudsman office in the "Arab Spring" states would be a welcome development, as far as institution-building and fight against corruption are concerned. The Council of State, Greece's supreme administrative court, is another institution whose success could serve as a model in the institution-building process in the countries of the "Arab Spring". Its record on enforcing the compliance of administrative acts with the constitution, in particular with reference to environment, is valuable and testifies to the usefulness of exporting institutional design and good practices to the countries of the "Arab Spring." Moreover, Greece could help cover another key institutional deficit of the "Arab Spring" states in the medium term, namely building up capacity in civil and penal justice. The significance of a well-trained and efficient judiciary for the successful operation of a democratic state cannot be overstated. Judges in the Middle East have often been treated with suspicion, as defenders of authoritarian regimes and systematic violators of human rights and the rule of law. Changing this perception would be of paramount importance for building-up legitimacy for the new regime. A series of workshops and seminars could be organised by Greek authorities at the request of the transition states of the Middle East, so

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that junior judges are familiarised with European highest priorities. The judiciary is only one example of legislation, norms and human rights protection. a state sector where such training could have quick Protection of individual autonomy, religious freedom beneficial results and where Greece can play a and freedom of expression should be among the constructive role.

Conclusion

This study does not aim to underestimate the negative effects of the current economic crisis on Greek foreign policy-making. The crisis sets certain frames to the diplomatic capacity of Greece, in particular by limiting the availability of economic resources and diplomatic capital. On the other hand, this study purports that it is feasible even under the current adverse circumstances for Greece to play a constructive role in the transformation of its southern and southeastern neighbourhood. There is plenty of unrealised potential, as far as the contribution of the country to peace, security and stability in the region is concerned. Greece maintains significant military, cultural and institutional resources, which cannot be compromised by the crisis and could be operationalised with the aim to promote Greece's regional role and consolidate its position within European foreign policy-making mechanisms regarding the Middle East. The deterrence of piracy in the Horn of Africa, the protection of Christian communities in the Middle East and institution-building in the Arab transition states are three examples of what Greece could do to play a constructive role in the Middle East. Such initiatives can help restore Greece's international image and reposition it in the forefront of developments in the Middle East.

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