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The Islamist Threat amidst the Refugee Crisis: Background and Policy Proposals

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Greece has a history of imported international terrorism originating mainly from Muslim countries. At the end of the 1960s, Middle-Eastern and Arab terrorist groups imported their activities into Greece. During the 1980s, international terrorist activities increased, yet, in the 1990s they gradually faded away. Historically, international terrorist acts have been committed in Greece by Arab, usually Palestinian groups, against American and Israeli targets, and Kurdish organisations against Turkish targets. These groups/organisations included the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as well as the Palestinian May 15 Organisation, Abu Nidal group, Popular Struggle Front, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Black September, and also Lebanese Shiite groups, among others. In this respect then, Greece has no record of religious terrorism.

Indeed, currently the threat level originating from Islamist radicalisation in Greece is 'very low', according to a senior intelligence official. Greece was not a major player in the 'war on terrorism', as the country did not deploy any troops in Iraq, while the troops in Afghanistan participated mainly in low visibility, low risk engineering and medical activities as well as training missions. Moreover, Muslims hold a positive view of Greece, which is an ancient civilisation that did not have any involvement in the colonial wars. Furthermore, Greece has long-term good relationships with the Arab world, which started to develop in the early 1980s. However, there are various reasons to believe that Greece might be perceived by Islamists as an appealing potential target, despite the fact that it lacks the symbolism and strategic interest that such groups seek. Indeed, there are fears that radical Islamist groups could participate in low-risk assignments, such as recruitment, funding, propaganda and training. In fact, recent police operations have uncovered an increased, very low key and behind the scenes, activity of international Muslim terrorists in the country, which has been limited so far to the creation of a logistical and support basis for operations abroad. In this regard, Greek authorities have been at a 'heightened state of vigilance' regarding the use of the country as a transit destination to and from Middle East battlefields already since September 2014.

On top of that, the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean has created fears among policy-makers and security practitioners alike that the Islamic State (ISIS) will use and 'exploit the refugee crisis to infiltrate the West'. Along these lines, an operative working for ISIS recently revealed to the news site of the British papers Daily and Sunday Express that 4,000 covert jihadists have been successfully smuggled into Europe hidden amongst refugees. Despite the ambiguity of this statement, it is the first time that ISIS plans to infiltrate western countries by hijacking the refugee crisis are 'officially' confirmed. Considering this scenario as true, Greece appears to be particularly vulnerable, since it is currently the main gateway to Europe for refugees. Recent police reports suggest that Greek authorities are 'closely monitoring the phenomenon' by exchanging intelligence with the US, Britain, France and other countries, and by looking for any 'visible signs' of association with ISIS among newcomers at the borders. Up to now, there is 'no hard evidence' that the country has been used as an entry point by covert jihadists, according to a police source.

In sum, the Greek authorities' response to the ongoing refugee crisis has shown that security concerns have not undermined humanitarian considerations. Greek security agencies are aware of the potential infiltration of covert

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jihadists within the refugee crisis context, and are handling this scenario discreetly. Yet, their response can be further improved on two levels:

- As a first-line measure, all newcomers must be registered to the Eurodac fingerprint database. Indeed, a number of reports have suggested that Greek authorities have failed to apply this measure consistently, particularly in the beginning of the refugee crisis. The consistent application of this measure will enable national police authorities and public prosecutors of EU member states, and agencies such as Europol, to cross-check, in specific cases, Eurodac biometric data against their national criminal databases, minimising, in this way, the risk of infiltration of covert jihadists to mainland Europe. In this regard, the European Commission's proposal to create 'hotspots' on the ground of frontline Member States, with the participation of the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex and Europol is a step to the right direction. The work of these agencies will be complementary to one another and will assist national authorities with the identification, registration and fingerprinting of incoming immigrants and refugees.
- As a pre-emptive measure, Greek authorities need to start developing and implementing a comprehensive counter-radicalisation community-based approach. As a number of European countries re-establish border controls amidst the refugee crisis, thousands of immigrants and refugees are in danger of becoming trapped in a country they do not want to stay in. This may lead a number of them to become radicalised on an ethnic or religious basis, and unload their grievances through violent or non-violent (e.g. marches, hunger strikes) acts. Thus, Greek authorities must start building relationships of trust with: on the one hand, missionary movements and Sufi groups, which perform grassroots awareness work about Islam; and, on the other hand, associations and informal mosques that have politicised the Islamic profession, and are associated with Islamic political parties abroad (e.g. Egypt, Pakistan, etc). These actors are as threatened by the potential infiltration of jihadists and the radicalisation of the migrant/refugee population as the rest of the society. In this respect, they must be treated as valuable allies, since they are capable of acting as an early warning mechanism for the authorities.

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