

## **Greece and Islam: what is the real threat?**

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In 1881 after the liberation of Thessaly, the figures of the Muslim minority in Greece were significant for the first time. Three laws were immediately voted by the Parliament, by which religious freedom and bringing into force the holy Islamic law (Saria) for Muslims as well as operating Muslim schools were fully guaranteed. No attempt was made to violently modernize the Muslim community and therefore the Muslim veil has never become a symbol in Greece the way it is in Turkey.

In 1920 Muslims represented over 15% of the population of the "Greater Greece". In fact, they were the large majority in several regions.

Greece, in contrast with the Young Turks, did not pursue a policy of systematic ethnic cleansing but an impressive policy of support of moderate Muslims culminating in law 2345/1920 regarding "The interim Grand Mufti and the Muftis of Muslims in Greece". Eleftherios Venizelos himself appointed a Muslim as the first Prefect of liberated Adrianople while in a large number of documents of the Greek Administration Muslims are characterized as "peaceful people easy to govern".

For 132 years, all Greek governments have addressed the issue of Islam in the same way: a) by making moderate Muslims privileged partners of the Greek State, b) by supporting their religious freedom and identity and c) by maintaining the Saria. This policy is more advanced even compared to Muslim countries, such as Turkey.

The only exception to this general policy has been the periods when Greece was trying to gain the support of Turkey against Italy and Bulgaria. At that time, Muslims in Thrace had been left at the mercy of the "Grey Wolves" with known outcomes.

Even when Turkey carried out the policy of ethnic cleansing against Greeks, Greece did not turn against Muslims in Thrace. The genocide was not turned into a confrontation between Christians and Muslims.

On the contrary, Greece in a serious, long term and effective way has been developing ties with the Arab world and with Iran. The culmination of this policy was the decision of Andreas Papandreou to support the Palestinians and in particular the PLO when all others had renounced them. Bilateral issues between Greece and Turkey should not obstruct our relations with 184 countries and 1,8 billion people.

The role of the Orthodox Church has been particularly crucial in this process. Due to the ancient Patriarchates, Greece holds an invaluable position, and lacking full awareness of it is yet another evidence of our essential weakness to successfully manage the legacy of the glorious Byzantium.

### **What did Greece gain from this policy?**

a) In 1920/1923 Muslims in Thrace themselves requested to be integrated in the Greek State, b) despite the persistent efforts of Kemal Ataturk and Bulgaria, Muslims in Thrace did not form rebel groups at the rear ranks of the Greek army in 1920-1922, c) Greece is the unique example of a country in Europe with an indigenous Muslim minority within its borders which hasn't caused any problems but, on the contrary, has fought patriotically against Italy and Germany in the Second World War (it is noteworthy that there are war memorials for

Muslims who got killed and that there are Muslims who have been decorated for valour on the battlefield), d) the image of Greece is very good in the Muslim and in particular in the Arab world despite the permanent efforts of Turkey to destroy that, e) Greece has never appeared on the map of the “enemies of Islam”.

### **What is at stake today for Greece**

The Nazis of Golden Dawn are moving in a way that has already created significant fractures within the great success of Greece and threatens to lead the most successful management policy of Islamic matters in Europe to collapse.

In Greece the State has played a key role in the organisation and the support of Islam leaving no vital space for any radicalization, contrary to the western practice of “laissez faire”. It is difficult to understand why, particularly from 2000 and on, Greece has started to make the same cardinal errors as the Western European countries.

At the same time, incredible falsehoods are published and reproduced on the internet, from reporting completely unrealistic figures of the Muslim immigrants in Athens to quoting Muslim personalities supposedly stating in 2013 that they “want to see again the Islamic flag on the Greek islands” even though they have passed away since 1949.

The Greek extreme right and its two leaders, Metaxas (1936-1941) and Papadopoulos (1967-1974), had not been anti-Semite or anti-Islamic. They both pursued the permanent Greek policy of supporting moderate Muslims and did not allow the development of anti-Semitic ideas. In fact, Papadopoulos had signed a special agreement with Pakistan allowing immigration in Greece; this is the reason why the Pakistani community in Athens is one of the oldest. The Greek extreme right has no reason to identify uncritically and hastily with the Nazis of Golden Dawn.

The policy of Golden Dawn on Islam (from identifying Islam with the issue of immigration and the construction of a Mosque to motorcycle marching in Muslim villages in Thrace) serves the Turkish strategy to present Greece as an anti-Islamic state, it jeopardizes the position of the Orthodox Patriarchates in the Arab world, it undermines peace and social cohesion in Thrace, it weakens the position of Cyprus and it paves the way for provocation against Muslims in Greek territory.

Potential perpetrators, in order to be able to take a human life, dehumanize first themselves and then the “opponent”. This ideological procedure progresses intensively (“the immigrants are hideous and sub-humans carrying all kinds of diseases”, E.Zaroulia Golden Dawn MP 18/10/2012). Many consider that racist texts dominating especially on the internet are just words presenting no danger. They make a fatal mistake. In 1999, a time of prosperity when hate speech had a considerably smaller audience than today, Greece experienced an unprecedented racist crime when a 23-year-old Greek man with a permanent job shot people in cold blood for a single reason: their skin colour. The result was one dead, two paraplegics and four seriously injured. In a time of crisis, all it takes is one paranoid person inspired by hate speech, such as that of Golden Dawn, to plunge a country into a cycle of racist or religious violence. The problems that we are facing right now are too serious; let us not commit suicide by degrading our history and our civilization.

Translated by Callis MITRAKA