EXPLAINING THE ABSENCE OF ISLAMIST TERRORIST ATTACKS AND RADICALISATION IN GREECE

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Despite diverging views and reports regarding the presence of radical Islamist links in Greece, not a single Islamist terrorist attack has taken place in the country until now. This is impressive taking into account that Greece has a record of imported international terrorism, as at the end of the 1960s, Middle-Eastern and Arab terrorist groups imported their activities into the country. Moreover, according to official sources, there are no recorded cases of organised Islamist radicalisation on Greek soil or cases of Greek Islamists fighting abroad. These facts are also impressive taking into consideration that Greek anarchists have recently joined forces with Kurdish fighters against ISIS in Syria. Moreover, not long ago, during the Kosovo war, members of the Albanian migrant community in Greece joined the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), while Greek nationalists participated in the Srebrenica genocide during the war in Bosnia. How can we explain the absence of Islamist terrorist attacks and radicalisation in Greece?

In recent years, Greece has been used as a transit country by individuals who travel to and from conflict zones with ‘unclear motives’. Only in 2016, 15 suspected Jihadists were arrested transiting through Greece, according to the recent Europol annual report. At the same time, there are various risk factors that render the country a potential target of Islamist terrorists, despite the fact that it lacks the symbolism and strategic interest that such individuals seek. More specifically, the regimes in the Arab world with which Greece maintained good diplomatic relations in the past do not exist anymore. Radical Islamist groups could participate in low-risk assignments, such as recruitment, funding, propaganda and training in the country. Furthermore, Greece is in close geographic proximity to countries that ‘export’ radicalism. Additionally, the grave economic crisis has created fertile ground for the potential development and adoption of radical ideologies and...
attitudes. On top of that, all key countries-targets are present in Greece in the form of embassies, corporations, and other institutions. Finally, Greece appears in the maps of ISIS as part of the so-called Islamic Caliphate.

According to Greek officials, Islamist radicalisation does not constitute a serious threat to the country for the time being. Greece was not a major player in the ‘War on Terror’, as the country did not deploy any troops in Iraq apart from a mobile medical unit, while the troops in Afghanistan participated mainly in low visibility and risk engineering and medical activities, as well as training missions. In addition, Greece had no involvement in the recent airstrikes against ISIS in Syria. Moreover, the Greek and Islamic civilisations are both ancient and coexisted with each other for centuries, while Greece did not have any involvement in the colonial wars. Finally, Greece has long-term good relationships with the Arab world, which started to develop in the early 1980s.

However, there are also less well-documented factors that can potentially shed light on the absence of Islamist terrorist attacks and radicalisation in Greece. Despite the persistent lack of comprehensive state integration policies with clear-cut long-term objectives, migrants and refugees have achieved a high degree of integration into the Greek society, mainly thanks to their own initiative, but also thanks to particular social dynamics at play. More specifically, Athens, in contrast to many other EU capitals, does not have migrant ghettos. In other words, there are no neighbourhoods in Athens, where exclusively migrant communities reside segregated from the native population. Social stratification in Athens is both vertical and horizontal, as in poor neighbourhoods, where ghettos can potentially grow, there are apartment buildings where both natives and migrants coexist on different floors. Simply put, class distinction also exists within apartment buildings, not only across neighbourhoods in Athens.

Finally, one should not underestimate the decisive role of the hundreds of civil society groups, organisations, associations and collectivities, professional and voluntary, in facilitating the integration of migrants and refugees into the Greek society. These actors very often function as a ‘safety net’ that absorbs the grievances of migrant and refugee communities. Through the mundane production of information, tricks for survival, mutual care, social relations, services exchange, solidarity, and sociability, these actors very often fill in the absence of state-led welfare programmes and mitigate the divisions between native, and migrant and refugee populations.

Of course these factors alone cannot fully account for the absence of Islamist terrorist attacks and radicalisation in Greece. They indicate, however, that Greece in particular, but also the European South more generally, holds valuable understudied lessons and experiences that can benefit the fight against Islamist radicalisation.

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