

ISLAM, GREECE, AND THE WORLD OF DREAMS

By Special Correspondent

One of the most persistent myths of Greek diplomacy is Greece's "immaculate" relations with the Arab, and by extension, the Islamic world. The myth emerges from the traditional skepticism of postwar Greece toward the State of Israel and economic ties with some of the Arab countries, which went through a peak in the 1970s only to decline to near extinction since. Greek political leaders accepted the myth as part of a widespread anti-American narrative that stressed good relations with all those "oppressed" by US and Western "intervention." The Palestinian issue and its embrace by left-wing Greek political parties added to the persistence of the myth and its perpetuation to this day.

A closer look though reveals no real "special relationship" between Greece and the Arab world. Certainly, Greece's thinly veiled rejection of Israel created a positive climate in Greek-Arab relations, but it did not power any concrete policies of, say, Arabs supporting Greek positions in international forums. Greece did not get preferential treatment in its insatiable thirst for oil from Arab oil producers, neither did it figure in any way prominently in the endless international efforts to find a "solution" to the Middle East problem, although some Greek political leaders did add non-existent Greek diplomatic "initiatives" in the Middle East crisis to their repertoire of domestic bragging.

After 9/11, the myth assumed new importance as a "guarantee" against fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. Greek politicians did not hesitate to link the myth to the absence of Islamic-induced acts of terror on Greek soil -- but without of course a shred of proof to back their claims. This illusion persists unabated as Greece struggles to contain a huge wave of illegal immigration, which increasingly originates in Muslim Asian countries.

There is little evidence, if any, that Greek authorities give the requisite attention to the critical question of the possibility of illegal immigration bringing into Greece Islamic "sleeper" terrorists or, indeed, spawning locally resident disgruntled populations that could engender future terror attacks against Christian Greece. The myth plays an important role in this complacent attitude. Yet, *real threats hardly evolve along the lines of what makes one feel good and helps him avoid dark thoughts about the future.*

What Greek "planners" should also address is the well-established links between Islamic terrorists and radical Albanian elements. Kosovo's independence has given a substantive boost to these elements, who make no secret of their desire to see parts of Greece "Koso-vised" en route to "Greater Albania." And in the background, Arab fundamentalist money continues to play the key role in a generalized Muslim effort to establish strong footholds in Europe and undermine European governments and societies.

It is high time that Greece shakes herself out of the slumber of somehow being a favorite friend of Muslim countries and begin a multifaceted re-assessment of her approach to Islamic fundamentalism and its impact on Greece's domestic as well as longer-term foreign relations. European integration, equal rights, NATO, and the Balkans as a "zone of peace and prosperity" should cease being convenient excuses for avoiding to face realities.

Unfortunately, Greek political elites refuse to detach themselves from such comfort-inducing attitudes because the alternative involves *real mobilization and, unavoidably, the debunking of myths, including that of "excellent Greek-Arab relations," which have served as cushions against hard truths for so long.* But surrendering the security blanket is the only way to go.

Copyright: www.rieas.gr