

**GREECE'S ELUSIVE NOVEMBER 17 TERRORIST GROUP:
KEY QUESTIONS REMAIN AFTER THE 2003 TRIAL
AND CONVICTION OF 15 OF ITS OPERATIVES**

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ABSTRACT

Some six years after a Greek anti-terrorism tribunal convicted 15 operatives of the deadly November 17 terrorist group the case is far from closed. Key questions remain unanswered while a handful of operatives and collaborators who played a vital role in identifying high value targets for one of Europe's deadliest terrorist groups remain at large. This study, using primary sources and participant observation, finds that several attacks against high-value foreign officials that spanned over three decades would require access to classified information that none of the convicted operatives ever possessed. The study concludes that the intelligence arm of the once elusive terrorist group remains at large.

INTRODUCTION

On November 17, 2003 a Greek anti-terrorism tribunal handed hefty sentences to 15 convicted members of Greece's notorious "November 17" terrorist organization

that killed with impunity for over 27 years. Those convicted included the group's leader and its main hit man, both of whom received multiple life sentences. Greek authorities claimed that the trial of the 15 members of the "November 17" meant that they had solved most of the 23 political assassinations that had been claimed by the terror group. But did they?

Having sat in the courtroom just a few feet away from Greece's most deadly terrorists, one question became central: How could these people be the most fearful terrorists in the country, responsible for killing high-value targets from the United States, Britain, Turkey and Greece for nearly three decades? The question is at the core of a series of questions that come to challenge the notion that those behind the bars are the only ones responsible for the group's 23 murders and dozens of rockets and bomb attacks since 1975. The group's first victims was CIA station chief Richard Welch, killed in 1975, while its last victim was British defense attaché, Brig. Stephen Saunders in June 2000.

To answer the central question one has to analyze the profiles of those convicted and determine if these people had the operational capacity to carry out those attacks on their own. At the same time one has to analyze the attacks and selection of targets and determine if those convicted had the intelligence and operational expertise to carry out those attacks. The profiles of the convicted terrorists were compiled based on primary sources and participant observation.

THE PROFILES

Alexandros Giotopoulos: Identified by Greek authorities as the "ideological leader" of the group, Giotopoulos was born in Paris where he studied economics and became active in far-left groups during France's May 1968 student revolt. His father,

Dimitris Giotopoulos, was a close associate of Leon Trotsky. Giotopoulos, who was going with the alias Michalis Economou, was captured on July, 17 2002 on the tiny Greek island of Lipsi. At the time of his arrest he was 58. Authorities arrested him while preparing to board a hydrofoil in order to travel to Patmos, where his French wife, Marie – Terez Binot, was waiting for him. From there they were going to go to Samos and then Turkey. Both Giotopoulos and Binot taught at the Greek-French College of Athens and had been living in Athens since 1993. The apartment was located about 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) from the hideout of November 17 on Damareos street. Giotopoulos had been a member of the “May 29” organization from 1967 to 1969, while an emergency military court had convicted him in absentia to five years imprisonment. Other known aliases included Alexandros Iatropoulos, while within “November 17” terrorist group was known as “Lambros.” Inside the courtroom he seemed uneasy and he denied any participation in the terrorist organization. He was charged with murder for alleged involvement in 19 killings, and he was sentenced to 21 life terms and 2,440 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Dimitris Koufondinas: Portrayed as the groups chief assassin, Koufondinas was known as the man with a thousand faces. Working as an amateur beekeeper in the years immediately before his arrest, Koufondinas, 45 at the time, was known within 17N as Loukas. Greek authorities believe he joined the terrorist group in 1983. Koufondinas was the most defiant among the defendants, not only because of his bold surrender (he took a cab to Police Headquarters in Athens, after a two-month manhunt, and told the officers at the entrance that his name was Dimitris Koufondinas) but also for claiming in court full political responsibility for all of the groups actions. In the courtroom, Koufondinas was cold and with a posture reflecting his intention to claim senior-level status within 17N, especially after he saw that

Giotopoulos was denying any involvement and seating two rows behind him. I am a member of 17 November. I assume political responsibility for its actions. Most of its actions were anti-imperialist and Anti-American, he told the court, adding that the group is proud of its deadly attacks. To the families of those who became a target -- unfairly according to them, but rightly according to the organization -- history will judge us, he noted later. Koufoudinas was charged with direct involvement in nine murders, several attempted murders, and at least 65 bombings. He was sentenced to 13 life terms and 2,446 years (25 years maximum) in prison. His longtime companion, Angeliki Sotiropoulou, 40 at the time, also a beekeeper, was also arrested and charged as an accomplice in two murders, but she was eventually acquitted. The two got married after the trial in a civil ceremony at the Korydallos prison.

Savvas Xiros: One of three brothers charged and convicted as members of 17N, Savvas Xiros was the first member of the group to be arrested after being seriously injured in a June 29, 2002 botched bomb attack in Greece's largest port of Piraeus. The son of a Greek Orthodox priest, Savvas Xiros worked as an iconographer. Within 17N he was known as Michalis. Greek authorities believe he joined the terrorist group in 1986. He suffered serious injuries from the botched bomb attack and underwent a series of eye surgeries and lost several of his right hand fingers. Authorities retrieved from Savvas satchel a revolver that had been taken from a policeman killed during a 1984 robbery, which authorities linked to 17N. The premature explosion of the bomb that injured Savvas may have been caused by the cheap materials used to assemble it. Savvas Xiros, 40 years old at the time of the trial, confessed shooting British defense attach Brig. Stephen Saunders four times with a rifle as the latter sat in his private car, caught in early morning traffic on June 8, 2000. Savvas was charged with direct involvement in six murders and as an accomplice in

scores of other felonies, including attempted murder, use of explosives, and armed robbery. He was sentenced to six life sentences and 2,076 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Christodoulos Xiros: Brother of Savvas Xiros, Christodoulos was 44 years old at the time of the trial. Codenamed “Manolis,” Christodoulos was a musical instrument maker and lived mainly on the Aegean Sea island of Ikaria. The eldest of ten siblings and one adopted child, Christodoulos is believed to have joined 17N back in the end of 1983 and to have introduced his two brothers to the terrorist group. Authorities believe he was one of the most active 17N operatives. He confessed to involvement in nine killings, a string of bombing attacks and stealing anti-tank rockets from a military base. He was charged for involvement in ten murders and scores of other felonies. In the courtroom, he often exhibited anger and aggressiveness. He was sentenced to six life terms and 2,076 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Vassilis Xiros: The youngest of the three Xiros brothers who were members of 17N, Vassilis was known by the codename “Panais.” Greek authorities believe that he joined the terrorist group in 1995. Vassilis was a car mechanic and lived in the northern port city of Thessaloniki, Greece’s second largest city. Vassilis was 30 years old at the time of the trial. In the courtroom, he was rather quiet. He confessed to two murders, including his involvement in the killing of Brig. Stephen Saunders in 2000. He was charged for being an accomplice in two murders and five attempted murders, 14 bombings, and four robberies. He was sentenced to 176 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Vassilis Tzortzatos: Codenamed “Stamatis,” Tzortzatos was described as one of 17N’s main assassins especially active in the 1980s. Greek authorities believe he joined the terrorist group in 1985. Working as an electrician in Athens, Tzortzatos was 48 years old at the time of the trial. He confessed to the killings of eight Greeks. During the trial he was quiet. He was charged with in 33 terrorist actions from 1985 to 1992, including eight murders, 31 bombings and a string of robberies. He was sentenced to four life terms and 1,537 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Iraklis Kostaris: A 37-year-old real estate agent, Kostaris was known by the codename “Haris.” Greek authorities believe that he joined 17N in 1988. He was charged with participating in three murders, two attempted murders, and three robberies. Evidence and statements by others in custody implicated him in several of the group’s attacks between 1988 and 2000, including the killings of U.S. Air Force Sgt. Ronald O. Stewart in March 1991 and of Brig. Stephen Saunders in 2000. He was sentenced to one life term and 67 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Pavlos Serifis: A 47-year-old worker at an Athens Childrens Hospital, Pavlos Serifis is said to have been a member of 17N since 1975. He confessed that he was a lookout during the 1980 slaying of two Greek policemen and said that Giotopoulos was one of the two assassins. He also detailed his involvement in the 1975 killing of CIA station chief Richard Welch. He was charged with three felonies but because of a 20-year statute of limitations, he was not charged with the killings in which he admitted participation. In court he rejected his previous confession and claimed that he was innocent. He was sentenced to ten years in prison.

Thomas Serifis: Known by his codename “Stathis,” Thomas Serifis is said to have joined 17N back in 1988. A 37-year-old bus driver, Thomas Serifis admitted

helping steal dozens of anti-tank rockets from an army base in central Greece in 1989 and two bazooka tubes from the Athens War Museum the following year. He also confessed to participating in a 1989 bombing and a 1990 bank robbery. He was charged with involvement in two robberies, three bombings, and supply of explosives. He was sentenced to 37 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Costas Karatsolis: Also a 37-year-old real estate agent, like Kostaris, he is said to have been recruited to 17N by Kostaris. Known by his codename “Stelios,” he is said to have joined the terrorist group back in 1987. He confessed to carrying out three armed robberies and participating in the theft of dozens of anti-tank rockets from an army base in central Greece in 1989. He was charged with four robberies and one attempted murder. In court he said he was innocent. He was sentenced to 48 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Nikos Papanastasiou: Known by his codename “Nikitas,” the 51-year old pottery maker from the city of Serres is said to have joined 17N back in 1975. He was charged as an accomplice in three murders, one attempted murder including the killing of a Greek publisher in 1985, and the attempted murder of U.S. Army Sgt. Robert Judd in 1989. In the trial he denied all charges. He was sentenced to ten years in prison.

Patroklos Tselentis: The 43-year old Tselentis was known by his aliases as “Alekos” or “Tenias” (translates to ‘Film’). He was the 13th suspect to be arrested by Greek authorities and is said to have joined 17N back in 1983. In the first hours of his interrogation he was uncooperative but later he confessed to participating in five killings, including that of U.S. defense attaché U.S. Navy Capt. William Nordeen in June 1988, and two attempted murders, including that of U.S. Drug Enforcement

Agency station chief George Caros. He also confessed to participating in the 1987 bombing of a bus carrying U.S. servicemen that injured 13 people. He was charged with participation in four murders, including that of William Nordeen, five attempted murders, three bombings, and three armed robberies. He was sentenced to 371 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

Costas Telios: Known by his codename “Markos,” Costas Telios is said to have joined 17N back in 1988. The 40-year-old school teacher admitted to taking part in the theft of about 100 anti-tank rockets from any army depot in 1989 and an armed robbery. He was charged with two murders, one attempted murder, and one robbery. He told the court that he met Christodoulos Xiros on the island of Ikaria in the summer of 1987 and that a year later he was introduced to another three members of the terrorist group, Loukas (Koufondinas), Michalis (Savvas Xiros), and Stamatis (Vassilis Tzortzatos). In the course of the trial the prosecutor called for leniency for Telios because his confession helped authorities build their case. He was sentenced to 112 years (25 years maximum) in prison. In an act of leniency, his 25-year sentence was suspended.

Dionyssis Georgiadis: Known by his codename “Alexis,” Georgiadis was the youngest of the 15 to be prosecuted as a member of 17N. The 26-year old had volunteered for the special forces during his national service in the army. Greek authorities said that he had joined the terrorist group in 1988, but that is problematic as at the time he was only 12 years old. He confessed to involvement in a bombing and a robbery that did not cause any injuries. He was charged as an accomplice in one bombing and one armed robbery. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

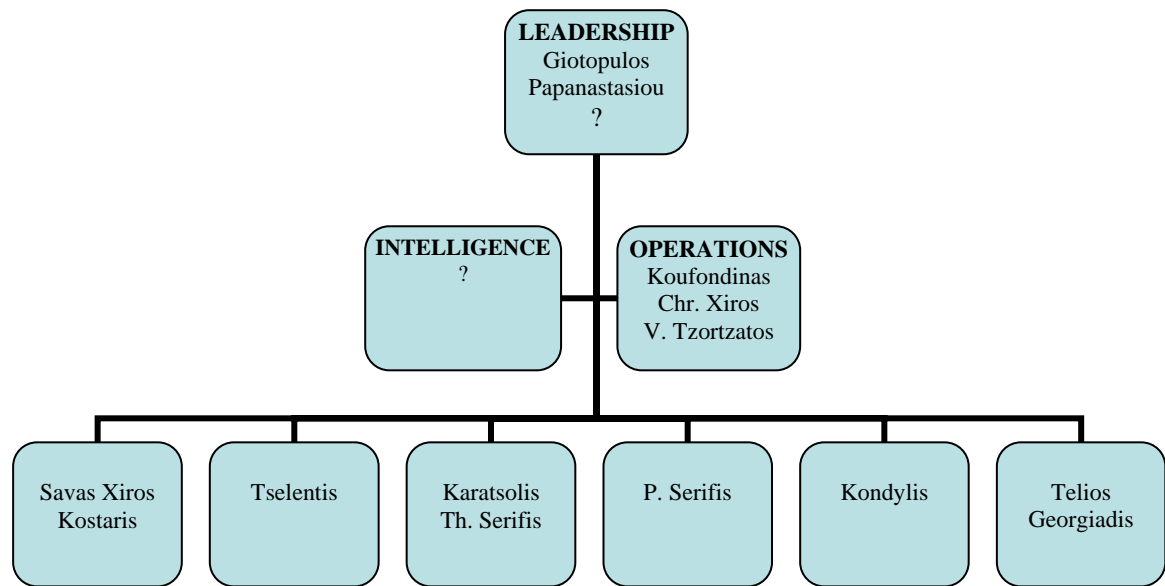
Sotiris Kondylis: The 41-year-old brewery worker went by the codename “Aris” and is said to have been a member of 17N since 1990. He was accused of taking part in several high-profile heists and attacks, including the slayings of two Turkish diplomats in Athens in 1991 and 1994. He was charged with involvement in one murder, two attempted murders, two bombings, and two robberies. He admitted only to his membership to the terrorist group. The prosecutor called for leniency as his confessions helped authorities build their case. He was sentenced to 49 years (25 years maximum) in prison.

THE STRUCTURE OF 17N

The organizational chart (See Graph 1) was compiled from testimony of some of the convicted 17N terrorists. 17N, codenamed “the company,” had three levels. Giotopoulos and Papanastasiou, along with a third person who we have no information about, were at the leadership level. This doesn’t mean that all three of them kept these positions permanently; available information does not offer clues about how long each of these persons held these top-level positions. The second level is occupied by Koufondinas, who allegedly led the “operations department,” alongside Christodoulos Xiros and Tzortzatos. Kostaris, Telios, Tselentis, Karatsolis, Thomas Serifis, Pavlos Serifis, Kondylis, and Georgiadis occupy the lowest level. There is no information about the length of time operatives of the second and third level occupied those positions or how long they were affiliated with the terrorist group.

“November 17” Organizational Chart

GRAPH 1



This organizational chart poses several problems. First and foremost, there is no information about who was in the intelligence department of the group that provided precise intelligence on high-value targets. This intelligence obviously emerged from information that was not accessible to the public and was either confidential or classified. With the exception of 1975 assassination of Richard Welch, whose name, address, and phone number had been published in a local political magazine called *Anti* alongside the names of another 64 Americans, who they allegedly worked for the CIA in Greece, the majority of 17N attacks against high value foreign targets required access to confidential or classified information (See Table 1 & Table 2).

Specifically, how did 17N discover the name, position, and description of George Tsantes, the U.S. Navy Captain who was the head of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group in Greece, and who was assassinated on November 15, 1983? How

did the terror group learn about the identity of U.S. Navy Captain William Nordeen (killed by a car bomb that was remotely detonated on June 23, 1988), or about Brig. Stephen Saunders (shot to death on June 8, 2000)?

TABLE 1

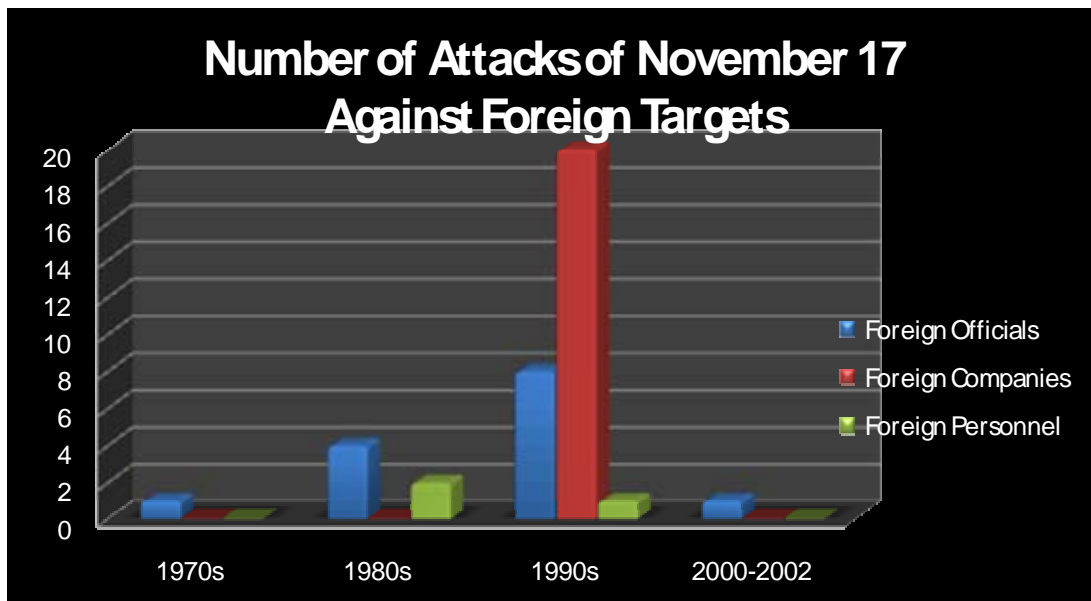
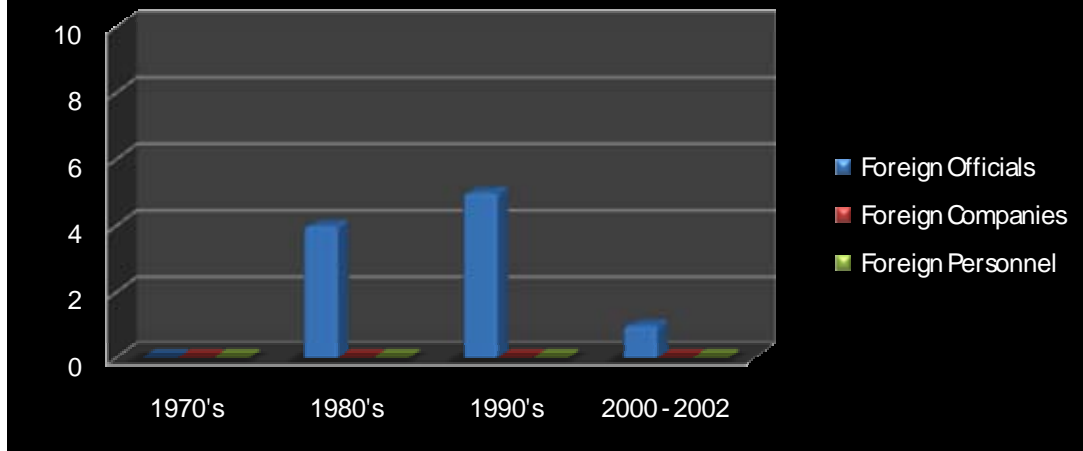


TABLE 2

Number of Attacks Requiring Detailed Intelligence



The people who stood trial and were convicted for their role in 17N never held positions that would have allowed them access to such information. It follows rather obviously that the terrorist group had people who provided tailored pre-strike intelligence and who remain unidentified to date. The argument that there wasn't any need for an intelligence branch in the group because everybody knows everybody in Athens is naive. The greater Athens area is home to nearly 5 million people, making it a very hard place for anyone to know everyone. In order for the 17N operatives to single out those high value targets in a metropolitan city the size of Athens, tailored intelligence was clearly required; none of those convicted during the 17N trial had access to any such information directly.

In 2001, a former station chief of Greece's National Intelligence Service (EYP) said in an interview that the agency knew the members of 17N. In the course of the trial, former Greek Public Order Minister Giorgos Petsos, survivor of a 17N bomb attack in 1998, alleged that Greek intelligence was in cahoots with the terrorist organization. Petsos asked the court to call Costas Tsimas, the Greek intelligence

chief in the 1980s and 1990s, to testify, but this never happened. Petsos then noted: “These people standing trial are just a small operative element. The masterminds are still at large.” The profiles of the convicted 17N members seem to corroborate Petsos’s conclusion.

The way that the targets were selected and the planning of the attacks further strengthens the theory that 17N had detailed intelligence about the identity and location of the targets. It would have been impossible, for example, to pinpoint Captain Tsantes from among Americans, working for the U.S. government in Athens at the time, without precise information about his capacity and his daily movements. Captain Tsantes was gunned down, along with his Greek driver Nikolaos Veloutsos, at a traffic stop suggesting that 17N knew a lot more than just his name and face. The terrorists apparently knew his routes and even his home address. The style of the Tsantes attack mirrors the shooting of Brig. Stephen Saunders on June 8, 2000, when Savvas Xiros and Dimitris Koufondinas, riding on a motorcycle, approached Saunders as he was sitting behind the wheel, caught in traffic, and shot him to death. In both cases, the terrorist possessed intelligence that was not available to the public. Thus, people other than the 15 convicted members of 17N, who provided the group with critical intelligence, have yet to be brought to justice.

Second, the ages of the convicted members indicate that there must have been rotation among 17N members as time progressed after the group’s first appearance in 1975. For example, Thomas Serifis, Iraklis Kostaris and Costas Karatsolis were both 37 years old at the time of the trial, while Vassilis Xiros was just 31. Based on their respective ages alone, it is obvious these three terrorist must have joined 17N during its later phase. Greek authorities believe that Vassilis Xiros joined the terrorist group

in 1995, Costas Karatsolis in the end of 1987, and Iraklis Kostaris and Thomas Serifis in 1988. So, who was there before them? By that time these younger members had joined the group, 17N had already carried out a series of high profile assassinations and bombings that could not have been carried out without a full manpower complement. Of the remaining 12 convicted members of 17N, seven were less than 45 years old at the time of trial; according to Greek authorities, one of them joined the terrorist group in 1990, three in 1983, and three more after 1985. This means that nine of the 15 convicted 17N terrorist members were not active in the group prior to 1983. Furthermore, no one was convicted for, let alone implicated in, the Tsantes assassination. Similarly, there are no culprits in the Welch assassination. The earliest crime for which a member of 17N has been convicted was the 1984 fatal shooting of police officer Christos Matis during an armed bank robbery. Where is, therefore, the “first generation” of this notorious terrorist group? Many agree that these early 17N assassins are still at large.

CONCLUSION

17N may have received a serious blow and, perhaps, Greek authorities did indeed arrest and convict a large number of the group’s operatives, but this brief analysis shows no correlation between the selection of high value targets and the profiles of those convicted. The complete absence of any evidence on how 17N collected and exploited tailored intelligence prior to attacks, and the silence of Greek authorities on the subject, leads directly, if circumstantially, to the conclusion that significant members of this terrorist group are still at large. The profiles of those convicted are of lower- and mid-level operatives, with the exception perhaps of Alexandros Giotopoulos, suspected of being the ideological leader of the group, and Dimitris

Koufoudinas who was the group's chief assassin. The analysis showed that none of the convicted terrorists held ever a position that would allow them access to classified information about high-value targets. Those who supplied this intelligence for the assassination of foreign government officials in the 1980s, 1990s, and up to 2003 are still at large.