

THE EMERGING “ZONES SENSIBLES” IN ATHENS’ HEART

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Greece’s debt crisis, shrinking economy, surging unemployment and the continuous waves of illegal immigrants have transformed Athens, once considered one of Europe’s safest capitals, into a city with a growing public sense of insecurity.¹ Today, a part of the city centre of Athens is actually being divided into 'sectors of influence' by several criminally-involved immigrant groups,² while two out of seven Athenian communities are largely controlled by organised crime. Previously bourgeois quarters have been gradually 'colonised' by 'legal'-illegal immigrant groups with the support of certain locals and in particular real estate 'gangs' and proprietors, bookkeepers, civil engineers and lawyers. For years now, with the inertia of Greek governments, national and local, concerning immigration, this deteriorating situation has occurred relatively quickly.

Various enterprises and shops of dubious legality are developing rapidly, a migrant flow, mostly from the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa, with forged documents and the absence of a database should worry, among other, the authorities for unreported incomes of these groups and the 'underground' economy –the illegal and criminal part. A recent *SUNDAY TIMES* (2012) investigation by undercover journalists has found that criminal gangs in Athens are renting genuine passports and identity documents to thousands of illegal immigrants, enabling them to enter EU countries undetected. The gang charges immigrants €1,000 to hire the identity documents, which they use to pass through border control.³ The enterprises in the neighbourhoods of Athens are growing in interaction with each other and certain areas are methodically becoming materially and economically controlled by the foreigners dealing in food supply, clothing and apparel, beauty, communication, praying and churchgoing, expelling the locals and their enterprises. Several NGOs and other state organisations offer diverse support, such as for health and hygiene issues, meal provision, etc. to the rotating newcomers. *In the mean time the drug scene is expanding and attracting more people, prostitution is more widespread, the public spaces are deteriorating, lawlessness is establishing itself and soon, the situation will*

become difficult to control, unless state and local government decide to intervene efficiently.

In the past few years, many of such areas in some European cities (e.g. in France: 751 'Zones urbaines sensibles'/ Zus; 12 cities in the UK; Malmö in Sweden; the 'problem districts' in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht in The Netherlands) have been developed into 'no-go' zones that are off-limits to non-Muslims. They operate as microstates governed by Islamic extremists, while host-country authorities have lost control in these places and in many instances are unable to provide even policing, fire fighting and ambulance services.⁴

What have Greek authorities learned from comparable situations in other European countries with high rates of Asian and Muslim populations? Unfortunately, this remains an open question. Recent research and Institutes' reports all over Europe⁵ have pointed out that the 'no-go' areas are the by-product of decades of *multicultural* policies that have encouraged Muslim immigrants to create parallel societies and remain segregated rather than become integrated into their European host nations. Contemporary integration policies emphasize social-cultural assimilation of migrants as opposed to multiculturalism, which was the earlier focus.⁶ *In Athens, the Greek city with the highest rate of (illegal) immigrants, it is interesting to note that a growing deliberate segregation is confirmed, which the politics of the local government not only prevent but also support.*

On 16 November 2010 thirteen thousand people, according to the police, participated in the manifestations of the Muslims' public prayer in twelve different areas of Attica prefecture in a demonstration of power. In Athens the pray took place at the entrance of (Propylaea) the old University in the heart of the city, where dozens of Muslims who live in Greece, were assembled. The gathering at Propylaea took place under the initiative of the Muslim Association of Greece and it is the third time that prayer takes place in a public place.

Similarly, after six months Muslims gathered in April, 2011 in Rome's famous Piazza Venezia to conduct their Friday prayers and demand religious freedom.

Fears over a possible major demographic shift toward Islam as well as ongoing Muslim assimilation problems highlight the continuing divide between Europe and its Muslim population.⁷ What can Greece do, continuously experiencing the forcible entry of unwanted newcomers? Is the tolerance of the authorities towards deviant practices and various (sometimes unacceptable and unreasonable) demands, a way for the integration of this population, or is it a facilitation of the establishment of nests governed by criminal networks and extremists,⁸ and reinforcement of we-they configurations?

References

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- ⁵ For example, the Stonegate Institute, a not-for-profit, *non-partisan policy* organization carrying out research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity and freedom in human rights, defence, international relations, economics, culture, science, technology and law, addressing to human rights activists, moderate Muslims and expert investigative reporters (<http://www.stonegateinstitute.org/>).
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