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Turkey-Greece Relations

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between Turkey and Greece after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The discussion also focuses on Greek Orthodoxy as a point of contention.

TURKEY-GREECE RELATIONS

*Nuzhet Kandemir**

Even though Turkey and Greece are both members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization ("NATO") and are associate and full members of the European Union ("EU"), respectively, it is universally acknowledged that an undertone of bickering and tension has long characterized Turkey-Greece relations. This presents a rather odd dichotomy. The two nations should in fact espouse similar values and principles and share a common vision for building stability, security, and economic prosperity throughout the region in which they reside as neighbors. This, however, is certainly not the case and a spirit of cooperation seems increasingly displaced by the meanness of confrontation. While Greece no doubt will interpret this state of affairs in its own way, we in Turkey have our own perceptions of Greek foreign policy in general and vis-a-vis our country in particular. In our view, two factors influence current Greek policy: rising Greek nationalism focused upon unity through the Eastern Orthodox Church and antagonism based more on settling old scores with the Ottoman Empire than on working with the present Republic of Turkey.

It is already cliché to review foreign affairs by addressing the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ironically enough, it appears that the ramifications of the Soviet Union's demise may outlast the empire's seventy-year existence. No nation knows this better than Turkey, which stood with the West against Soviet hegemony throughout the Cold War and which has assumed a position as a frontline state in the post-Cold War era.

The fall of the Soviet Union has eliminated confrontation between nations based on ideology, at least as far as Europe and the Middle East are concerned. What remains has been characterized by some scholars as the "clash of civilizations."¹ From Turkey's perspective, contemporary foreign affairs, especially Turkish-Greek relations, are manifested by attitudes and positions that are profoundly backward-looking, mired in centuries-

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, FOREIGN AFF., Summer 1993, at 22.

old biases, and based on fanning ancient hatreds. To be sure, the flash points between nations increasingly appear to be culture-based. More to the point, religion is considered a threat to ignite any conflict. In our view, however, it is fundamentalist Christianity, in the form of Greek Orthodoxy, that has become the fulcrum on which Greek relations with Turkey turn.

Recent history in the Balkans clearly illustrates this situation. From the beginning of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbian aggression was not only condoned, but even hailed within certain Greek circles sympathetic to their Orthodox Serbian brethren. Serbian victory would have opened the way for Orthodox supremacy in the Balkans, effectively cutting off Turkey from Europe. Indeed, Turkey's attempts to contribute to multi-lateral efforts to stop the bloodshed and maintain the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious character of that country were defamed as resurgent Ottoman aspirations to establish an Islamic state, under Turkish control, in Europe. Turkey nevertheless persevered in laying the groundwork for establishing the Croat-Bosnian Federation while maintaining a dialogue with the Serbs. Countries that initially objected to Turkey's contributions later offered their thanks for the Turkish military's even-handed and objective role under United Nations' command by inviting Turkey to participate in IFOR.²

In the meantime, Greece was actively pursuing a so-called defense doctrine that would have an impact from Macedonia to Albania, the Aegean and Cyprus, reaching into the Eastern Mediterranean. This new defense doctrine was used to cover a multitude of aggressive nationalistic actions. For example, it was in the name of national defense that Greece attempted to intimidate Macedonia. This policy was relinquished only after gentle nudging by the United States. Additionally, the mass expulsions of Albanians out of Greece³ were justified on the premise of human rights violations in Albania, at a time when Greece itself was blatantly violating the Turkish minority's rights in Western Thrace. Not only did Greece seem to be immune from condem-

2. Philip Shenon, *G.I.'s on Alert After Report of Threat by Bosnia Serb Chief*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 23, 1996, at A6. IFOR is the abbreviation for the implementation force sent by NATO to maintain peace in Bosnia. *Id.* The IFOR numbers 60,000 troops. Craig R. Whitney, *NATO Urged to Keep Force in Bosnia After Pullout Date*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 21, 1996, at A1.

3. Nicholas Gage, *Another Balkan Flash Point*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 6, 1994, at A29.

nation for these actions against the Macedonians and Albanians, but its abuse of the human rights of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace continues unabated.

The defense doctrine also meant confrontation with Turkey on several levels. Greece soon began entering into military agreements with nations such as Syria,⁴ long castigated by the United States as a nation that harbors terrorism. In this instance, Syria, the enemy of Greece's enemy Turkey, became Greece's friend. Moreover, Greece had the temerity to criticize Turkey on human rights grounds while Turkish soldiers and civilians were dying at the hands of Kurdistan Workers Party ("PKK")⁵ terrorists who were supported by Greece's new ally.

Furthermore, Greece's most recent application of the defense doctrine erupted into the Kardak Rocks⁶ crisis in which open hostilities between Turkey and Greece were avoided at the last minute. Attempts to turn the Aegean Sea into a Greek lake have been well documented and the dispute over this tiny, uninhabited rock a few miles from Turkey offers another illustration. Turkey's resolute response to Greece's blatant land grab forced the Greeks to turn to the allies for support.

Greece asked the European Union to condemn Turkey for defending its rights on Kardak as well as in the Aegean, by imploring the European Union to take Greece's side in fulfilling its claims under the guise of "EU solidarity." Left unsaid in the Greek allegations was Greece's ongoing militarization of the Eastern Aegean islands in violation of international law. Moreover, no mention was made of the need to resolve outrageous Greek claims regarding the territorial waters or air space. Again, since Greece viewed these matters as issues of national defense,

4. Lee Stokes, *Close Ties With the Arabs World Have Not Kept Greece Safe From Terrorist Attacks*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 16, 1986, at 27 (reporting that Western Diplomats say that Greece has tacit agreements with PLO, Libya, and Syria prohibiting acts of Arab terrorism on Greek soil); Refet Kaplan, *Turkey Seeks to Calm Fears Over Deal*, WASH. TIMES, Apr. 12, 1996, at A15 (reporting that Turkey believes that military agreements between Greece and Syria should influence Turkey to reconsider its strategic position and enter into agreements with Israel).

5. Kaplan, *supra* note 4, at A15. PKK stands for Kurdistan Workers Party, a guerrilla group that has waged a 12-year battle against Turkish forces. *Id.*

6. Stephen Engelberg, *U.S. Brokers Peace Accord in the Aegean*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 31, 1996, at A6 (discussing dispute between Turkey and Greece over Kardak Rock in Aegean Sea and role of United States in avoiding conflict).

it felt no need to engage Turkey in dialogue or other settlement mechanism.

The United States was also beseeched for help. After all, in 1974, the United States essentially took the Greek side when the Turkish military intervened on Cyprus to stop the slaughter of the Turkish Cypriot community. Despite the fact that Greece engineered a coup in Cyprus to annex the island illegally, the powerful Greek lobby in the United States was able to see that Turkey was ultimately punished for fulfilling its obligation as a Guarantor Power per the 1960 London Agreement.⁷

This time, however, in the Kardak case, the international community insisted upon a resolution grounded in universally accepted principles that did not rely on religion, race or historical vengeance. The United States and the European Union asked Turkey and Greece to settle their dispute peacefully and within the prescribed legal framework. In Turkey's view, this even-handed reaction from our allies was encouraging and further set an example for others to follow.

This is a significant turn of events in that it confirms our view that in the "New World (Dis)order," nothing is more important to settling international disputes than the rule of law and dialogue. There is no other option for the established democracies but to act as a role model in this regard and to begin by applying international rules amongst ourselves first. What other hope is there for the emerging nations if we fail?

Our perception of the factors influencing Greek policy towards Turkey leads us to conclude that dialogue is the first and most crucial step in resolving the various differences between us. We believe that the criticism often directed at many military strategists applies to Greece as well, in that they are fighting the last war, or, in this case, the last enemy.

Ultimately, we have to pave the way for friendship. We are neighbors and we must live together. Our perceptions of Greek policy certainly have their own corollaries in Athens, based on its notion of a "threat from the East." It may well be that the only thing we agree on now is that there exists much that divides us.

7. 1960 Cyprus Treaty of Guarantee, Aug. 16, 1960, 382 U.N.T.S. 3; See Phillip J. Sands, Reporter, *Cyprus: International Law and the Prospects for Settlement*, 78 AM. SOC'Y INT'L L. PROC. 107, 107 (1984) (discussing 1960 Zurich-London Agreement that established independence of Cyprus).

But even that is a start, for as long as we understand that fanning ancient Greek hatred against Turkey, coupled with modern day nationalism will not allow the peaceful resolution of any problem. For Turkey to fulfill the obligations of a frontline state, which includes serving as a model for developing nations in the Balkans, Middle East, and Caucasus, we need full integration with Europe, and that requires Greek friendship. There is no question that Greece stands to gain as much from such a relationship as Turkey.

Turkey is optimistic about improving relations with Greece. The latest manifestation of this was Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz's recent announcement of a bold new peace initiative that is grounded in four dimensions:

1. *Mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes.* In addition to dialogue and direct negotiation, Turkey also supports a range of third-party options, including mediation, arbitration, and court proceedings.
2. *A political framework.* Turkey supports the development of a common document that would serve as the basis for a friendly working relationship.
3. *A new security framework.* This calls for clearer definitions of military and defense aspects of the relationship between Turkey and Greece. Its principle feature would be a program of confidence-building measures for military activities.
4. *A code of conduct.* This would establish ground rules for the day-to-day activities of both sides, forcing both from making statements or taking actions likely to generate hostile reactions.⁸

This is the most forward-looking plan to improve relations with Greece offered by Turkey in some thirty years. It was received very positively in the United States and Europe, but not in Greece, which reacted by continuing to block financial aid from the European Union that was promised to Turkey upon joining the Customs Union. Further, Greek Defense Minister Arsenis announced that Greece would still seek alliances with enemies of Turkey such as Syria and would maintain its provocative posture in the Aegean.

Still, Turkey continues to believe in the adage, where there

8. *Turkey's Aegean Peace Process Initiative*, Turkish Embassy, Washington, D.C. Press Release, Mar. 26, 1996, at 1 (on file with the *Fordham International Law Journal*).

is a will, there is a way. This was perhaps best expressed by Prime Minister Yilmaz in announcing his groundbreaking peace process:

Today, we are going through a tense period in our relations with Greece. The latest crisis has demonstrated once again that the present state of Turkish-Greek relations is fraught with dangers. The fundamental interests of both countries lies in the peace and cooperation, not confrontation. We both stand to benefit from good-neighborly relations. Turkey and Greece have to overcome the cycle of conflict into which that have been locked. The failure to settle the existing problems creates an environment conducive to the eruption of new crises. This vicious circle must be broken at some point. The leaders of both countries are faced with a historic responsibility to establish a climate of mutual confidence, to give a new structure to their bilateral relations which would be free of problems, and thus open a brand new chapter in Turkish-Greek relations. Turkey is ready and determined to do her utmost in that regard. I believe that the Greek leaders also have the necessary political will to live up to this historic responsibility.⁹

9. *Turkey Proposes Comprehensive Peace in the Aegean*, Turkish Embassy, Washington, D.C. Press Release, Mar. 24, 1996, at 1 (on file with the *Fordham International Law Journal*).