

Syria's Greek Orthodox are looking towards Greece



In May, the Greek Foreign Ministry announced a restoration of relations between Greece and Syria, and assigned former ambassador to Damascus and Moscow, Tasia Athanassiou, as a Special Envoy for Syria.

Although the Foreign Ministry claims that the suspension of diplomatic relations "was dictated by the security conditions", it is commonly accepted that it was ordered by former Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras in December 2012 under orders from NATO and the European Union.

Both NATO and the EU supported, and in some instances still are, backing jihadists against the secular government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Greece became a country ruled by European banker, EU and NATO puppets from 2010 onwards when on May 2 of that year, the so-called socialist government of

George Papandreou signed the first of three bailout packages with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF.

This caused a 25% contraction of the Greek economy, an unemployment rate of 27% and skyrocketed poverty. Any semblance of Greek independence in domestic and foreign policy was lost.

However, the appointment Athanassiou is being viewed as a sign of Greece's renewed geopolitical interest in its southern neighborhood and of its desire to establish a greater role in a country to which it has deep historic ties, [**Al-Monitor**](#) wrote.

According to Ioannis Grigoriadis, head of the Turkey Program at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Athens, the decision is part of a Greece's re-engagement with the region as tensions between Greece and Turkey continue to escalate.

Speaking with Al-Monitor, Grigoriadis said, "The Libyan-Turkish maritime agreement prompted a reaction leading to a complete reconsideration of Greek policy in the Middle East. As Greece's economy continues to recover post-COVID-19, the Levant will be a new area of regional ambition for Greece."

Dimitrios Katsoudas, Greece's secretary general for European affairs from 2007-2009 and a previous policy adviser who has held various positions within the country's current ruling New Democracy Party, told Al-Monitor:

"Greece has a strong will to participate both in Syria's permanent pacification and to its reconstruction," adding, "Greece, for historic, geopolitical and economic reasons, needs to hold a strong position in Syria, and our allies need to understand this."

In a phone interview, Charles Catinis, a businessman based in Damascus, told Al-Monitor, "Greece was the last European country to close its embassy when the war started. Now when we need to renew our passports or obtain documents, we must travel to Lebanon to visit the Greek Consulate in Beirut."

"I was born in Damascus, as was my father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Our Greek citizenship was passed along from father to son," he told Al-Monitor.

"We had a great relationship between Greece and Syria before the war and part of that was because of the shared culture and religion," he elaborated. "We

celebrated Oxi Day and Greek Independence Day along with the church holidays."

Although Syria is only home to a small community of Greek citizens, Syria is home to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, the largest Church in the Middle East whose roots are with the Eastern Roman Empire.

Katsoudas told Al-Monitor, "Greece has eventually come to recognize that the Assad regime has practically been the only one to protect the Christians. This is why now that the regime is restabilized in Syria, Greece tries to formulate a more concrete policy for the protection of Syrian Christians."

After living through years of their country's international isolation, members of Syria's Greek Orthodox minority who spoke with Al-Monitor welcomed the news of Greece's diplomatic return.

Basilios, a 22-year-old student of English literature currently living in Homs who asked Al-Monitor not to use his full name out of security concerns, stated, "Greece didn't want to leave Syria. It was forced by NATO and the European Union. Greece is our good neighbor."

Grigoriadis told Al-Monitor that Greece's reengagement with Syria will need practical follow-through, stating:

"What is important now is if Greece goes on to invest diplomatic and economic resources in order to claim a stronger position in the Levant, and to some degree to reclaim the Greek historic legacy in the region."

That legacy may prove to be an asset as Greece seeks inroads in the country while navigating the concerns of US and EU allies who continue to impose sanctions aimed at marginalizing the regime.

If Greece can find a way to assuage those demands it may be able to carve out a role for itself as a mediator between the EU and Damascus while positioning itself to take part in the eventual reconstruction of the country and leverage its position against Turkey.

A basic starting point could be more assistance to the Orthodox community.

Catinis says that since the closure of the embassy in July 2012, the Greek Club of Damascus has lacked a Greek teacher, which was previously provided by Greece.

"The teacher and opening the embassy to allow Greek nationals to do their

paperwork here in Syria are the two most important things Greece can do", he said.

Farah, a 31-year-old primary school teacher living in Homs who asked Al-Monitor not to use her real name out of security concerns, said she could see some benefit from the renewal of Greek interest in her country if it instills the Orthodox church with the aim of helping Greek Orthodox Syrians stay in Syria instead of emigrating.

She told Al-Monitor, "Greek Orthodox look to Greece like they look into a dream. But I want the church to teach the Orthodox that Syria is their country too.

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