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Jihadism, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the “Frontier States”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The continuing radicalization of Islam, which presents a fundamental security challenge for the western world, gives new dimension to the term “frontier state.” Greece and Israel have a common strategic role under this label as they are both willing and able to safeguard western interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, a region with an upgraded geostrategic importance. In upgrading the conventional role of the “frontier state,” Greece and Israel can maximize security for the region.

The radicalization of Islam: An ongoing process

Many analysts, in their eagerness to trace the origins of the radicalization of Islam, look to the rise of the theocratic Shiite regime in Iran in 1979 as the starting point. Others focus on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or the predominantly Muslim region of Bosnia Herzegovina during the Yugoslav civil war. Still others who are more theoretically inclined go back to the first decades of the 20th century to examine the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology, a blended creed that accommodates both a profound anti-colonial stance and a pronounced Salafism. Some go back to the 18th century’s austere enactments of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, or even further back to the reactionary utterances of Ibn Taymiyyah in the second half of the 13th century and the first half of the 14th.

None of these approaches is wrong, but they all disregard a basic feature of Islam that has accompanied it since its early days.

Islam is a religion based on oxymorons. This can be clearly seen in the matter of violence and its relationship with religious practice. Jihad, the great issue relating to the use of violence within the context of Islamic religious practice, does not

exist in a theoretical vacuum but has a direct link with all four fundamental schools of Islamic jurisprudence: the Hanafi, the Maliki, the Shafi'i, and the Hanbali. According to all four, the world is divided into two spheres: Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam), where the faith has established itself; and Dar al-Harb (the House of War), where it is incumbent on Muslims to fight non-believers in order to establish the rule of Islam. As the prophet Muhammad famously asserted in his farewell address: "I was ordered to fight all men until they say, 'There is no god but Allah.'"

It can be argued that Islam is not a religion of violence but rather a religion that understands its utility for the promotion of its revolutionary essence according to Martin Wight's international theory. This conceptual utility of violence, which lies deep in the doctrinal core of Islam, is the driving force behind its continual radicalization. Islam, especially its majority Sunni branch, has never ceased to turn to radicalism every time it seems necessary.

But if radicalization is not new to Islam, what is different about today? Why do jihadist groups seem not only exceptionally powerful but also so resourceful at finding new means of spreading terror and death among their enemies?

The main difference between the past and the present regarding the radicalization process within Islam is technology – specifically, the existence of the internet. Images of terror and indirect methods of primitive psychological warfare, mainly targeting western societies, can be easily viewed in western homes. The 21st century is not the era of Islamic radicalization but the era during which jihadist Islam acquired the ability to promote and broadcast its messages of primitive hate and raw nihilism to millions.

The highly advanced technological means available to jihadist Islam offer it the opportunity to make contact with even wider audiences through the "dark web." This further boosts the number of people who can be reached.

Technology is changing everything in the War on Terror. This is the first time in human history that the global community of Muslims, the *umma*, has taken on a specific form and shape in the digital dimension. This represents a threat maximizer because jihadist groups now have numerous channels of communication through which they can organize actions and recruit members.

Greece and Israel: The "frontier states" concept

In J.J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell's latest work on US foreign policy, they show that it is necessary for Washington to form a new grand strategy that gives greater importance to its frontier state allies. Israel is on this list due to its key role in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Another pivotal

state, Greece, is not included. This is an oversight, as Greece is essential to efficiently tackling jihadist Islam today.

The strong ties between Athens, Jerusalem, and Nicosia go well beyond the promotion of open communication links in the field of energy. The strategic triangle, and especially the close cooperation between Athens and Jerusalem, can help the rest of the western world obstruct jihadists as they attempt to target western states.

How do Athens and Jerusalem help in this regard?

- By establishing a network of flow control of refugees now that Turkey seems unable and unwilling to do so. Jihadists make use of the continuous flow of refugees into Greece through the Aegean corridor in order to gain access to the West.
- By putting preemptive military operations into action from Greek, Israeli, and Cypriot ground against human smugglers acting in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek military naval capacity combined with the Israeli military air force can transform the Eastern Mediterranean into a region relatively immune to external jihadist action.
- Israel is a tech leader while Greece has a large soft power capacity. This combination can lead to the creation of a political narrative that can counter the power formula of jihadist Islam in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For all of these to be implemented and to influence developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and southeastern Europe, the US will have to maintain its open support of Israel. The decision by the White House to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem was a political gesture of great importance in this direction. So too should Washington attribute the status of frontier state to Greece.

The radicalization of Islam will continue as a new generation of Takfirism, a hybrid form of nihilism and ultra-religious fanaticism, is growing in Libya, Syria, and the Sahel. The strategic importance of Israel and Greece as the last frontiers before the stormy Muslim archipelago – considering as well the Russian and Chinese poles of influence – reveals the embryonic capabilities the two states possess as the two major western actors in the region.

The world is changing fast, with numerous state and non-state actors openly challenging the post-WWII sociopolitical and economic system. A fundamental strategic restructuring of the western world is greatly important during this period. The Eastern Mediterranean, with its upgraded geostrategic value, will be a key venue for both challenges and opportunities in the decades to come.

Greece and Israel both have important roles to play as western frontier states. The coming period will be characterized by challenges all along the periphery lines between the western and the Muslim worlds. This will not be a confirmation of the *Clash of Civilizations* of S.P. Huntington, because jihadist groups target Muslim states as well, but a recognition that a new era has arrived with frontier states having more responsibilities to strengthen collective security than before.

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