

Palestine International Institute

**Aspiring to Bind Palestinians in the Diaspora
and Expatriates to the Homeland**

The Palestinian Community In Greece

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Foreword

The Palestine International Institute (PII) pioneers in producing studies provided by researchers in the Diaspora in coordination with the Institute, under the broad category, 'Palestinians in Diaspora'. This time we are pleased to present our readers with the new 2008 study entitled 'The Palestinian Community in Greece' which falls under the category of 'Horizontal Studies' which examines the emergence and evolution of communities and tackles issues related to the origins, structure, makeup, size, problems and challenges of Palestinian communities in the Diaspora. The PII also issues the 'Parallel Studies' series which are supplemental studies with indirect bearing on communities, such as the study on Arab-European relationships. These studies are overseen and supervised by the executive chairman and the research team. In addition, our scientific committee (comprising Dr. Mohammad Mikdashi, Dr. Hasan Al-Charif, Dr. Emile Nemah Khoury and Dr. Nabil Dajani), oversees the upgrading and maintenance of the PII website, as well as the update of the 'Vertical Studies' series, which are studies on the elite, focusing on the activists of the Palestinian communities in the Diaspora.

Before scrutinizing the data, statistics and information contained herein, we wish to indicate that this study presents academic insight based on scientific and objective research. This is one of the goals for which PII was established.

Our researchers have exerted considerable effort to overcome the difficulties imposed by the scarcity of resources and documents, in an attempt to achieve integrated, rather than fractured, data, at a time when scientific research is considerably lacking and insignificant. The importance of this study, as well as other PII studies, is due to a number of factors, the most important of which are the following:

- It comes as an early harvest in virgin territory, where documents and sources of information on these subjects, in both Arab and foreign libraries, are virtually nonexistent, including the Internet and centers that specialize in Palestinian issues.
- No scholar or institution has come up with a partial, needless to say complete, series of studies about Palestinians in the Diaspora in

countries where they exist, or about communities of countries which have hosted Palestinians.

Despite all said, we acknowledge that the present study is in its early stages and is open to further development and expansion on the basis of professionalism, authenticity, transparency and documentation, and with the intent of being broadened and updated. Our mission and duty dictate that we make sure it is subject to the above processes in each of its new editions.

The PII welcomes any comments on the development of its studies and scientific and research references, with the aim of achieving its final goals and aspirations. If it appears that we are lagging it is because our human and financial resources are limited, and the conditions under which the research is being conducted are difficult.

The time to pick the fruit of our labors is near. This has been the result of efforts exerted by a dedicated team, despite our humble resources. Our gratitude goes to the scholars and researchers who have contributed to this and other studies which aim to reach those interested, address their patriotic, national, human and intellectual aspirations, and reveal facts and data that were unknown to those who previously have had no access to such information.

We further reiterate our desire to receive feedback, and urge our readers to send any comments and suggestions that would serve to improve or advance our studies.

As'ad Abdul-Rahman,
Executive Director

Acknowledgement

The Palestine International Institute wishes to extend its appreciation and gratitude to all those who contributed to this study in various ways, including research, gathering information, translation, editing and typing... etc.

Special thanks go to Mr. Moustafa Al-Ajouz, the information officer at the Palestinian representative office in Athens, and Dr. Salma Al-Shawa for their major contributions to this study.

The Institute deeply acknowledges the role of the president of the administrative board of the Palestinian community in Greece, members of the board and some of its activists, Palestinian professional and syndicated unions, the Palestinian ambassador to Greece (2005-06) and members of the embassy. Their valuable collective effort has been essential in the making of this study.

The ambassador should be named due to his relatively high position

Thanks are due to all PII staff, including researchers and technical support, for their hard work and dedication, which is why this study has been produced with extensive content and in the proper format. Without their efforts this study would not have been possible.

Chapter One Greece in Brief

Greece lies at the strategic junction of Europe and Asia in general, and the Arab world in particular. It is heir to the heritage of ancient Greece, the Byzantine Empire, and is regarded as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. It is also one of the fountains of Euro-African civilization. Their deep rooted past gives contemporary Greeks a great sense of pride.

Greece is one of Europe's closest Arab friends
Europe's closest Arab friends????

Present day Greece is one of Europe's closest Arab friends, in general, and the Palestinian people, in particular, both at popular and official levels. Arab and Greek human and cultural interaction throughout history helped nourish strong ties of friendship and neighborliness. Greece was never party to anti-Arab colonial activity. Like the Arabs, it was subjugated under Ottoman rule for almost four centuries (1453-1829).

Invade them???? :[Yj]Comment

Greek religious links with Palestine date back to the 4th century A.D. when Emperor Constantine supported Christianity. His mother Helen covered the cross on which Jesus was crucified with a thin patina of gold to preserve it from decay. Palestine, being the birth place of Jesus Christ, became a pilgrimage destination for devout Greeks ever since. During early Islamic conquests, the exodus of the Byzantine army and the spread of Islam to the Levant, Greeks who inhabited this region experienced religious freedom, particularly under Caliph Omar Ibn Al Khattab and the leader, Abu Obaideh Amer Ibn Al-Jarrah. Greeks residing in Palestine did not collaborate with the Crusader army which invaded Palestine during the 11th century A.D. In return, the Mamluks and Ayyubids did not intrude upon them. As a result of this and religious tolerance, their presence in the region flourished. Since the Byzantine era, the relatively large number of Christian villages in the Levant and Palestine, in particular, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem and its adherent churches in Palestine and Jordan, are testament to this.

The atmosphere of religious tolerance gave rise to thriving Greek communities in the area which played a major role in forging friendly relations between Arab governments and their mother countries. Greece singled itself out from the rest of Europe by adopting a different position towards Palestine. At the outset, Greece voted against the partitioning of Palestine, and for two decades, refused to recognize the newly established state of Israel. In the mid-1960s Greece opened a diplomatic envoy office for Israel in compliance with NATO's foreign policy (Greece joined NATO in the early 1950s). Due to changing political

circumstances, Greece raised the level of Israeli representation to that of 'embassy' in 1991. In the same resolution the Greek government also elevated Palestinian representation from 'Diplomatic PLO Commission' to 'Diplomatic Commission for Palestine'.

Greece has an area of 131,957km² and more than 4,000 islands. Its population is roughly 12 million, out of which, seven million live in its capital, Athens. The Greek economy is dependent on tourism, trade and maritime activity, as it owns the world's third-largest commercial fleet and acts as a commercial intermediary between Western Asia, Europe and Africa. It is also agricultural and recently began producing some industrial products. Greece joined the European Common Market on May 28, 1979, and is a member of the European Union.

Greece is a presidential parliamentary republic in which the real power lies with the executive authority. The prime minister of Greece is the head of government and executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the Hellenic parliament. The powers of the head of state are vested in the president, elected by parliament, for a five-year term. The Greek governmental structure is similar to that found in many Western democracies, and has been described as a combination of the French and German models. The prime minister and cabinet play the central role in the political process, while the president performs some executive and legislative functions, in addition to ceremonial duties.

Chapter Two The Palestinian Community in Greece

History of Demographic Relations between Palestine and Greece

The West has always been enchanted by the orient. Ancient history abounds with political maneuvers and numerous conquests in the area either for commercial purposes, or as a refuge from a continent ravaged by civil wars or sectarian violence. Some came to the region purely for religious reasons by way of pilgrimage. However, history has few recorded waves of immigration going the other way (i.e. from the Middle East, including Palestine), towards Europe especially towards the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Which region do you mean? Pilgrimage would imply the Middle East

Is this a correct statement? It seems it should be the reverse, i.e., coming from Europe to the Middle East, including Palestine

The oldest and most outstanding of these Western waves is the migration of the Philistines, inhabitants of the Island of Crete, who sailed towards the eastern shores of the Mediterranean around the 3rd millennium B.C., and gave their name to contemporary Palestine. The campaigns of Alexander the Great further east soon followed. During his long march to Egypt, Palestine and beyond to present day Afghanistan, Alexander's campaigns built cities and Hellenic temples that, till this date, dot the landscape of Palestine. Since Palestine is the birthplace

of Christ and later became the cradle of Christianity, the area, with Palestine at its epicenter, became a place where people from the northern Mediterranean region, and Greeks in particular, flocked to perform religious rituals. Gradually many of these pilgrims opted to stay; with time, vibrant Greek communities began to form and became an integral part of the region.

Palestine, under the Byzantine Empire, lasted for many centuries and became a spiritual and commercial center. Both Palestinians and Greeks became vassals of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries; strong relations persisted, particularly with the influx of Greek pilgrims to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. Some Greek families have added the title 'Khatzi' to their names, which is a derivative of the Arabic word Hajj, while other families remained in Palestine, acquired Arabic and Palestinian nationality, while others kept their Greek nationality.

During the modern era, additional migrations between Greece and Palestine took place, especially during World War II. In 1940 Nazi forces occupied Greece, and thousands of Greek military and government employees were forced to take refuge in North Africa and parts of the eastern Mediterranean, living in camps that lasted until the defeat of the Nazi military in 1945. At the end of the war many of these migrants chose to stay and seek permanent residence, thus augmenting and invigorating the Greek community in Palestine until it became one of Europe's largest communities in the area. It was in the post-1948 era that parts of these communities were forced back to Greece by Israel and the chapter of compulsory, reverse migration of Palestinians towards the West, and Greece began.

Major Palestinian Migration Waves to Greece

Palestinian migratory waves to Greece have gone through many phases and included the following categories of immigrants:

► Students

Modern Palestinian presence in Greece dates back to the late 1960s when groups of Palestinian students arrived in the country to continue their education. They were lured by the relatively low cost of living compared to other European countries and by the availability of scholarships. The first group of students came from the occupied Palestinian territories and Jordan, encouraged by the presence of relatives. Their numbers multiplied during the 1970s and 1980s. Some later married Greek citizens, settled permanently in the country and enjoyed stable lives after securing jobs for themselves, in particular the doctors and engineers among them. These students harbored various cultural and Eastern religious qualities and constituted a unique phenomenon that attracted the interest and attention of Greek society. They shared a progressive revolutionary spirit that met the aspirations and

expectations of the Greeks at a time when Greece was suffering under a repressive dictatorial rule which persecuted and imprisoned thousands.

► **Businessmen**

The advent of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 forced many Palestinian businessmen and company owners living in Lebanon to relocate to more secure places. Greece was one of the countries that provided them with freedom of mobility, due to its relative political stability, conducive laws and investment atmosphere, which facilitated the establishment of foreign companies. Greece became home for hundreds of Palestinian families provided them a center for their businesses, stable incomes, and professional and socio-political activities. A majority of them permanently settled in the country, acquired citizenship and became the backbone of the Palestinian community. A few preferred to return to Lebanon after the civil war, which raged for fifteen years, and others transferred to other places.

► **White-Collar Employees and Laborers**

Some Palestinian businessmen and company owners, who had lived in Lebanon, brought a large number of their employees and laborers to Greece, accompanied by their families. These multi-nationals, mainly Lebanese or Palestinians holding Lebanese *laissez-passers*, and others were qualified to efficiently perform their jobs.

► **Blue-Collar Laborers and Illegal Immigrants**

By virtue of its location, Greece became a major gateway for illegal immigrants, coming from Asia and North Africa towards Europe, seeking either a good living and better work conditions, or political asylum. Greece is a signatory to the Shengen Agreement, which permits inter-European movement without a visa or passport, making migration easier. Palestinian immigrants or refugees formed a substantial part of this illicit migration having fled the harsh conditions Palestinians endured under Israel occupation, in the Diaspora, or in refugee camps. Misinformed and unaware of European residency laws, and unable to enter Europe, the greater part of these immigrants found themselves stuck in the country and forced to live in it without official papers. Many others who made it to other European countries were forced back to Greece, the country where from they crossed into Europe. This procedure is in compliance with European law, which stipulates that providing refuge to a foreigner should be in the first European country he sets foot on. Lacking official permits and fearful of becoming discovered, many of them turned to the black market to make a living, in the process, forming another segment of the Palestinian community characterized by instability.

Distribution of the Palestinian Community: Numbers and Features

Although Palestinian immigration to Greece is a relatively recent phenomenon hardly any Greek city or island is vacant of Palestinians, or of one Palestinian family. Major cities, however, attracted more Palestinians than others because of their metropolitan nature like Athens, the capital, which is the center for businesses and corporations, and the place where governmental institutions and public service offices are concentrated. Salonika, the city with the second largest population and famous for its university, was historically the greatest attractor for Palestinian students. The city of Patras has another concentration of Palestinian students, yet other groups of Palestinians are found in Crete, or in the remote island of Khios or in the cities and villages of the Peloponnese, such as Kalamai.

The Palestinian embassy in Athens estimates the number of Palestinians in Greece to be between 3,000-3,500 persons, distributed among the four aforementioned categories. Embassy sources put the number of students at 500 men and women. Palestinian women, whose number is relatively low, live in Greece for study or work or because they married Greek men. Most of them however, came to the country with their spouses who were seeking work. Many Palestinian male students married Greek women, bore children and settled in the country as a result. The subject of intermarriage and its impact on the children has become an issue often debated among Palestinians in Greece.

Social disparities affected the patterns of migration and settlement in Greece. During their stay in the country, students, who were often deeply engrossed in politics, were able to forge a network among themselves despite their political differences. These relationships were sometimes interrupted as students changed residences for various reasons. Students were generally different from the rest of the Palestinians in that they married Greek women, which eased their assimilation into society. Their fluency in Greek, and that of their children, who were studying in Greek schools, and their mingling with Greeks further contributed to their integration into society. They are, in general, socially active and belong to the upper-middle class. Most of them work in the public sector and a few in the private sector. A few work for Arab companies and the majority enjoy a steady income.

The experience of the businessmen and white-collar employees and laborers differs greatly from the other two. The relocation of whole companies, with their special status and reserved rights, to Greece enriched the experiences of members of these two categories. Companies provided their staff with all the needed social, technical and administrative services, which limited their contact with the Greek society and Greek institutions. Their interaction was confined to Lebanese and Jordanian Arab communities only, the two countries they

previously lived in and whose nationalities they carried. Many hold degrees in engineering, business administration and accounting, while their sons go to British, American, or other foreign schools where they study Arabic at school or take private Arabic lessons. As a result, they do not learn Greek but are fluent in English. The socio-economic status of members of these categories depends on their positions in the professional hierarchy of their companies; it is noted that most of them belong to the upper class of Palestinians in Greece.

The fourth category consists either of laborers who came as students but failed to make it through college, or those who entered the country illegally in search of better social and economic conditions. Because of their illegal entry, lack of official documents and scarcity of jobs in Greece, most of them faced difficulty in finding suitable jobs and worked in the construction industry despite the fact that some of them had higher degrees. In some cases, family connections helped them find better jobs and integrate more smoothly into society. Most members of this category work for Greek employers and live in mixed neighborhoods containing Greeks, Syrians, Lebanese or other minorities. Moreover, their relations with other members of the Palestinian community in Greece are limited. Their children study at Greek schools and as a result, master the language at an early age, besides speaking Arabic at home.

Palestinian Institutional and Private Activity in Greece

► General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS)

Palestinian students who streamed into Greece in the 1970s took advantage of the friendly atmosphere prevailing in the country, and the network of Greek and Arab students in trying to steer Greek public opinion towards solidarity with the Palestinian movement.

After the downfall of dictatorial rule in 1974, freedoms, unions and political activities in the country returned, but the Palestinian political movement needed time and an official framework before going public. The idea emerged of forming an all-encompassing body combining Palestinian groups in Greece, particularly among students. A Greek branch of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), under the auspices of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was established. Other branches were also set up in places with concentrations of Palestinian students like Athens, Salonika and Patras. The student union and its various branches became a forum for Palestinian political activity in the country. The Greek branch of the union followed in the footsteps of GUPS by giving a say to each of the major Palestinian factions on vital issues, on a *pro rata* basis. The union played a pivotal role in strengthening Palestinian-Greek relations. Special relations were forged between the progressive elements of both nations. Relations between GUPS and its Greek counterpart were

so strong and coordination so pervasive that it became the ideal of relations with the people, governments and political power centers of other European countries.

GUPS founded a Palestinian folkdance troupe to perform in front of Greek spectators during Palestinian national festivals. Later on, it helped form the Palestinian General Union for Doctors and Pharmacists and to open a PLO office in Athens, which later assumed the role of a permanent Palestinian diplomatic mission. GUPS also represents Palestinian youths during celebrations and annual carnivals and forges relations with youths in Greek political parties.

► **General Union of Palestinian Doctors and Pharmacists**

As early Palestinian students graduated from the faculties of medicine and pharmacology, they came to recognize the necessity for establishing a union for doctors and pharmacists and a branch for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, to act as an umbrella for their activities. Upon its formation, this union worked in tandem with its Greek counterpart and participated in strengthening the good ties with the Greek people and their various organizations which embodied the same interests.

The union played a major role in treating Palestinians who were wounded during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and, with the assistance of the Greek government, attended to the wounded during the two *Intifadas* by sending numerous Greek medical teams to the Palestinian cities and camps in the occupied territories and to refugee camps outside Palestine. In addition, the union sent large shipments of medications and medical equipment in cooperation with the union of Greek doctors and the ministry of health.

► **Palestinian Labor Union**

During the 1970s and 1980s, Greece was a favorite destination for students and the number of Palestinian laborers in the country was still negligible. All of this changed in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the first Palestinian *Intifada* in 1987. These two milestones in Palestinian history had negatively disrupted their lives and forced many Palestinian youths to target Greece, either to work or as a gateway to other European countries, like Denmark and Germany, where large and vibrant Palestinian communities are present. As their numbers in the country swelled, they set up a preparatory committee on October 5, 2003 to pave the way for establishing a Palestinian Labor Union. On February 25, 2004 the first congress of the union was convened and was attended by representatives from the general secretariat of the union. The objectives of the newly formed union were to organize Palestinian laborers

in Greece under the umbrella of the central union, defend their rights improve their vocational, social and living standards and represent them in Arab and international labor forums.

► **Palestinian Community Society**

Palestinians residing in Greece have long aspired to form a society that encompasses them all, irrespective of their political and social affiliations particularly since there was a successful society for the Palestinian community in Salonika. The need for such a society became more pressing as the number of Palestinians in the country increased considerably after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Their efforts were successful when, on January 4, 1995, the Athens Court of the First Instance authorized the formation of a society, under License 229, that would work for the good of resident and incoming Palestinians on cultural, charitable, and social grounds.

The Society's stated objectives would promote brotherly relations and social cohesion among its members, preserve Palestinian social heritage traditions and norms, promote Palestinian-Greek cultural relations and amalgamate friendly relations with the Greek government and with other Arab and foreign communities in the country.

In its fourth convention held in February 2004, the society outlined its major activities which included offering assistance to Palestinians in the occupied territories, such as the relief effort and reconstruction of the Jenin refugee camp in 2002, hosting a large number of Palestinian children from the homeland and the Diaspora in annual summer camps holding a charity dinner, attracting Palestinian and non-Palestinian politicians and intellectuals who would speak on various subjects, inviting foreigners who visited Palestine to convey their experiences and pictures to the Greek people, with proceeds channeled to Palestinian children in kindergartens. Other activities included establishing a Palestinian blood bank in Athens with the help of Palestinian doctors and pharmacists publishing literature on the history, culture and struggle of the Palestinians, constructing a website in Arabic and seeking to expand it so that it includes Greek and English, building a library that contains historical, political and cultural books, introducing an Arabic learning program for children, forming the Palestinian folkdance troupe in cooperation with GUPS, hosting artistic groups in annual ceremonies with the proceeds used for humane purposes in Palestine and the Diaspora and showing Palestinian films.

► **Palestinian Community in Salonika**

The founding convention for the Palestinian community in Salonika convened on February 14, 2006, with the participation of 150 members. A nine-member administrative board was elected. Despite its humble resources, the board was able to institute Arabic language classes for children of the Palestinian and Arab community and Greek wives of Arab men; establish members of the community in a folkdance troupe, which performed in many of the northern Greek regions; and conducted annual celebrations which provided opportunities for public relations and fund raising. These meetings, which were attended by ministers, members of parliament, the governor of the region and mayors of towns in northern Greece, provided monetary and material assistance to the occupied Palestinian territories. There was also a continuous, deliberate effort to strengthen ties with the Arab and Islamic communities and reinforce official, popular and party-level Greek-Palestinian relations.

► **Palestinian Embassy in Athens**

The New Democracy government agreed, in 1979, to open an official office for the PLO in Athens as a result of:

- Changing political circumstances
- The ascendancy of the PLO at the Arab and international levels
- The substantial effort exerted by the PLO in Greece

The objective was the establishment of common ground for cooperation in the service of the Palestinian cause. The new office was called a liaison and media center. In 1981, the government led by the Greek Socialist Movement (PASOK), gave Palestinian representation diplomatic status. In 1991, also under PASOK, it officially became the Embassy of Palestine.

Through its network with Greek institutions, the Palestinian embassy spares no efforts in promoting Palestinian-Greek relations and offering all support possible for the Palestinian cause, given the distinctive ties with the Greeks at all levels, which are nurtured to help Palestinians in the homeland and in Greece as well.

The Palestinian embassy also maintains friendly relations, based on mutual respect, complementary roles and full coordination with other Palestinian entities and societies functioning in Greece.

► **Consolidated Contractors Company**

The origins of this company date back to 1952 when it was established in Lebanon by the late Kamel Abdel Rahman, Hassib Sabbagh and Saïd

Khoury. These men united their efforts to establish one of the major contracting companies, not only in the Arab world, but worldwide particularly in the construction of oil and petrochemical facilities.

With the onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1974, the headquarters of the company was moved to Athens, although a large part of its operation was concentrated in Saudi Arabia and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, in addition to other Arab and foreign countries. This giant company, famous for its initials 'CCC', employs thousands of workers in its various fields of operation around the globe. It was natural that, after its relocation to Athens, its employees, with their distinctive scientific and cultural qualifications, would serve as the backbone of the Palestinian community in Greece. Added to this is the humane, pan-Arab and nationalist Palestinian role adopted by the company's top management exemplified by the 'educators' Hassib Sabbagh and Said Khoury and their offspring, who currently are leading the company.

The company's significant role may be realized through the efforts of the united partnership of the Sabbagh-Khoury families in providing financial, educational and relief assistance, in the past and projected toward the future. It is not unusual to expect aid would stream towards the community's elected administrative board through the allocation of fixed annual payments to cover running expenses. In addition, it has become customary that some ladies of the Sabbagh-Khoury families organize an annual charity celebration with a formal dinner as part of the events, and whose proceeds are channeled to Palestinian welfare and relief efforts.

It is also worthy of mention that the elder son of Hassib Sabbagh, Suhail Sabbagh, is the honorary president of the Palestinian community in Greece. It is also noteworthy that he devotes much of his time, effort and support to the community.

Chapter Three

Greek Postures vis-à-vis the Palestinian Cause

In addition to what has been previously detailed in this study, with respect to the Greek pro-Palestine stand, present day accords did not develop into a clear Greek position until the downfall of dictatorial military rule in 1974. Prior to this Greece was deeply involved with its own domestic problems. The reinstatement of democracy in 1974 brought with it two major political parties: the New Democracy Party, a center-right liberal conservative political party founded by Konstantinos Karamanlis, after his return from Paris; and the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement Party, known as PASOK, as a center-left party founded by Andreas Papandréou, also upon returning from exile in Paris, in the post-dictatorship era. These two parties along with the old Communist Party and other

mainstream parties, which surfaced briefly on the political arena and then vanished, were the mainstay of Greek politics after 1974.

The following is a brief summary of these three parties and their positions vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause:

► **The New Democracy Party (ND)**

In the first free elections of the post-dictatorship era, the New Democracy Party won by a landslide, securing 54.4% of the vote. This result is attributed mostly to the personal appeal of Karamanlis, rather than the influence of ND as a party of the electorate. Karamanlis intended the ND to be a more modern and progressive right-wing party than those which had ruled Greece before the 1967 coup, including his own National Radical Union. The party's ideology endorsed radical liberalism, a term defined by the ND as the 'prevalence of free market rules with the decisive intervention of the state in favor of social justice'. In 1977, the ND again won the national elections, albeit with a largely reduced majority of 41.9% still it retained a comfortable parliamentary majority.

Under Karamanlis, Greece redefined its relations with NATO and tried to resolve the Cypriot issue following the Turkish invasion. During the party's tenure and despite its absolute support for NATO, particularly during the Cold War, the ND maintained good relations with the Arab world and adopted a progressive policy towards the Palestinian cause. This was evident during the entire period of the party's rule, which lasted from 1974 to 1981, under the leadership of Karamanlis who had been a prime minister for two consecutive terms in the 1950s. The ND voted for all UN resolutions favoring the Palestinian cause. While in power, the party allowed the first PLO official office to open in Athens in 1979. Although lacking diplomatic status, this office assumed the role of the PLO's official representative in Greece. In a different light, the Israeli diplomatic mission which had existed in Athens since the 1960s, was not elevated to embassy status until 1991.

► **The Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)**

Between 1974-1981, PASOK was the opposition party against the government, adopting leftist platforms in internal and foreign affairs. In the October 1981 national elections, PASOK won a landslide victory with 48% of the vote. With 173 seats in parliament, it was able to form the first socialist government in the history of Greece. Although Papandréou had campaigned for the withdrawal of Greece from NATO and the European Economic Community, he later changed his policies towards both institutions. When in power, PASOK maintained strong relations with the Arab world and was a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause. Many

PASOK leaders had strong personal relations with the late PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, dating back to the days of military rule in Greece.

During PASOK rule, the government approved the opening of the first PLO diplomatic mission in Athens and Palestinian students enrolled in Greek state universities were exempted from tuition fees. The warm welcome which Chairman Arafat and his Palestinian supporters met when their ship docked in the Greek port of Piraeus, after their exodus from Beirut in 1982 aboard a Greek ship, is a clear testament to the strength and depth of these relations. This was further illustrated when Arafat was invited to the PASOK convention in 1984. PASOK remained in power for eight years, but in 1989 lost the elections to the New Democracy Party. It regained power in 1993 and ruled until 2004 when it lost again to the New Democracy Party.

American and Israeli media outlets took exception to these strong relations and accused Greece of promoting 'Palestinian terrorism'. Nevertheless, the Greek government ignored these allegations and continued its friendly relations with the Palestinians.

Greek-Palestinian relations survived extreme events including the profound changes in the Soviet Union and the death of Andreas Papandréou in 1996. They suffered a slight downturn in the second half of the 1990s because of Greece's membership in NATO, which propagated indifference towards the Middle East, and its membership in the European Union, which tried to limit immigration. Nevertheless, all of this, in addition to the occurrence of incidents attributed to Palestinian students and the disinterest of the Palestinian official stand on Palestinians in the Diaspora after the birth of the Palestinian Authority, had only a marginal effect on these relations. PASOK preserved its ties with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, as attested to by Arafat's attendance at PASOK's two conventions in 2000 and 2001.

► **The Greek Communist Party**

The Greek Communist Party is the third-largest political party in Greece. It was founded in the 1930s as a Marxist-Leninist party and continues to the present day along the same principles. The party played a decisive role as an element of Greek national resistance fighting against Nazi occupiers during World War II. The party also fought a five-year long internecine civil war during 1944-1949 but was defeated and banned until the fall of the 'rule of colonels' in 1974. It then resumed its public political activities. The party has a long history of friendly relations with the Palestinians, in view of its global position of solidarity with all freedom fighters; it strongly condemns the Israeli occupation and supports the right of Palestinians to establish their own independent state.

► Solidarity Committee with Palestinians in Greece

This committee was founded in December 2004 for the purpose of extending political and material assistance to the Palestinians. It is a non-governmental committee, officially registered with the authorities in Athens. Its members include a number of political leftist personalities and the Union of Palestinian Workers. In January 2005, members of this committee made their first political visit to the occupied West Bank including Jerusalem and Gaza, and offered €25,000 to build a kindergarten in Rafah under the supervision of the Aid Society in Gaza. During its second visit, the committee financed the establishment of a sewing workshop in Abu Dees by donating €10,000 to the Union of Women's Labor Committees. In August 2005, the committee provided €10,000 to the Aid Society in support of the Rafah kindergarten. Currently the committee intends to implement an ambitious program to increase its assistance to Palestinian social institutions.

Relations with the Greek Host Society

Despite the recent decline in popular Greek support for political affairs, the relations between Palestine and Greece remain friendly. These relations take many forms: pro-Palestinian demonstrations, fund-raising activities, song festivals and visits to the occupied territories by various solidarity groups especially during the second *Intifada*.

Good relations notwithstanding, increased illegal immigration to Greece especially from North Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East, prompted the Greek government to regulate the status of immigrants, particularly in the 1980s in an attempt to stem their flow. Immigration had risen markedly due to loose border control, which rendered Greece a gateway to the European continent although most immigrants to Greece were Albanians or from eastern European countries. For this purpose, the Greek parliament ratified a law in 1991 that called for the control of illicit immigration and the law went into effect in June 1992. In July 1996, another law was issued with the objective of rectifying the conditions of illegal immigrants in Greece. One of the clauses of the new law calls for giving illegal immigrants in Greece legitimate status in a two-stage process. The first stage calls for all such immigrants to register and obtain temporary legal permits. Permanent residence would be granted in the second stage. In January 1998, more than 373,000 persons out of an estimated 800,000 illegal residents registered under this new law. Although Greeks, in general, view with favor the presence of immigrants, the connection of some immigrants with crime organizations prompted some Greeks to view with suspicion and even hostility, specific groups of immigrants, especially Albanians, who form the majority of immigrants.

In the case of Palestinian residents in Greece, a large number of them acquired Greek nationality before the law went into effect. Students obtained Greek citizenship either because they married Greek citizens, or by virtue of their long stay in the country which was the same reason businessmen and their families did the same. Most employees obtained work permits prior to their entry to the country, via their companies. Many unskilled laborers and some immigrants who entered Greece illegally, were able to get work permits despite the difficulty. Some members of this last group specifically took advantage of the new law which granted illicit immigrants the opportunity for legal residence.

The relations governing Palestinians with their host society depended on the duration of their stay in the country and on their socio-economic status. Students who arrived during the 1970s integrated more easily into their new society than businessmen and their employees, who showed no interest in Greek society and confined their relations to Palestinians or Arabs sharing similar work conditions or having the same class and religious affiliations,

Unlike other immigrant groups, business-minded Palestinians labored under the misconception that their stay in the country was temporary and only necessitated by adverse political circumstances in their homelands. On the other hand Palestinian laborers integrated smoothly into society, despite the fact that Palestinian traditions were still deeply entrenched in their psyche.

There are also cases of total disassociation from the Greek society which were exhibited in some people's reluctance to learn Greek or their unwillingness to understand the host society. Laborers and small-project owners are among the most integrated, due to their pressing needs to deal with society on a daily basis. Common complaints of the Greeks being austere religious conservatives stemmed from first impressions that soon vanished with continuous dealings and learning to accept each other.

Chapter Four

Arab and Muslim Communities and Constraints of Collective Work

Arab and Muslim Communities in Greece

With Muslim immigration to Greece soaring, Athens is trying to come up with ways to assimilate its minorities with their different cultures, religions and traditions. Since almost 99% of the population is Greek Orthodox Christian Greece may seem like an unlikely destination for Muslim immigrants. Its 11% unemployment rate ranks near the highest among European Union countries and it is one of the less-developed member states. Nevertheless, estimates put the number of Muslims in Greece at roughly 900,000 persons, categorized into three main groups, as follows:

- ▶ Muslims in the north, of Turkish origin — around 500,000 persons
- ▶ Muslims of various Arab and Muslim countries — around 400,000 persons
- ▶ Greek individuals who converted to Islam recently, numbering in the few hundreds

Some 200,000 Muslims, representing roughly a quarter of all immigrants in Greece, now live in Athens, up from 5,000 Muslim immigrants in the 1990s. The first wave came mostly from neighboring countries, particularly Albania and the Eastern European countries of the collapsed Soviet bloc. The second wave arrived after 1995 and included Muslims from farther abroad – the Middle East, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

From a geographic point of view, immigrant arrival in Greece is logical as the country straddles Asia and the West and represents Europe's eastern gateway. It is the only EU country in the Balkans and its seas, bordering Turkey, make for a porous border. Greece is also the least expensive point of entry, which makes it an attractive destination for immigrants. However, immigrants in Greece, as elsewhere in Europe, are finding themselves to be a vital component of the workforce, taking low-wage jobs, mostly in the construction and agricultural sectors which many Greeks decline. A large number of communities was formed including Filipinos, Egyptians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi in addition to Albanians, Turks and Greek Muslims of Turkish origin, who live in the northern part of the country. Yet this should not be understood to mean that Greece welcomes their presence, as there has been a great deal of resistance to incorporating immigrants into Greek society.

It is worthy of mention that Greek laws prohibit Muslim minorities, even their children born in Greece, from obtaining equal status as the native population. Work permits remain elusive due to high costs and ambiguities in the law. Political gestures of goodwill towards minorities are often met with resistance. The most recent proof of this came when socialist party leader Giorgos Papandréou's decision to appoint a Greek Muslim lawyer as governor in northern Greece sparked a national outcry. Feelings of goodwill are being challenged by the absence of a mosque in Athens, making it the only European capital without one. The Greek government backed a plan to build a mosque in Athens in 2000 but a change in government and opposition from locals and church officials saw that the proposal never materialized. While officials continue to make statements that support the building of a mosque, little has been done to bring this to reality. The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs 'has the right to give all the necessary permits for religious places of worship', said the ministry's press officer, Charidimos Caloudis. But the minister declined to comment when asked about the cause of delay and did not provide a time frame for the government to formally approve construction.

Some analysts say it is politically risky to push for the construction of a mosque. The actual reason behind this is that Greeks were oppressed during 400 years of Ottoman rule and many have come to associate Islam with this painful period of their history. 'Some Greeks equate Turkish rule with Islam', said Marios Begzos, professor of comparative philosophy of religion at the University of Athens. 'But Greeks and the Greek government must learn to distinguish between Turks and Muslims,' he added.

To some extent there are positive signs. Some 150 mosques exist in Greece, mainly in the northern region of Thrace, where an estimated 150,000 Greek Muslims live. The Orthodox Church has donated 300,000 square feet, worth an estimated \$20 million, in west Athens for the purpose of building a Muslim cemetery. But the symbolic absence of a mosque in the capital threatens to overshadow these gestures and has drawn international attention. Leading up to the 2004 Olympic Games, there was talk among the international Muslim community of boycotting the games. The Saudi government led efforts to fund the construction of a mosque and Islamic center.

Mosque Location

The construction of the Islamic center raised concerns among the Greek community, given the Saudi government's reputation for promoting a strict interpretation of Islam. The Greek government has since promised to fund and oversee construction of the mosque, without the Islamic center.

Location is said to be the last main point of contention. A location near the airport had been considered but the idea was abandoned since few Muslims live in this area. There was talk of renovating a mosque leftover from Turkish rule in the shadow of the Acropolis that has since been turned into a folk art museum. But it is very small – not suitable for Friday prayers – and is a symbol of Turkish oppression for many Greeks. Land adjacent to where the cemetery will be constructed is now said to be the most likely location. Meanwhile, Muslims in Athens pray at 20 non-official prayer centers around the capital (most of which can hold no more than a few dozen people), in addition to 130 other prayer locations — some without windows or ventilation and others which are rooms or storage areas.

In October 2006, the minister of religion announced plans for the government to build the first mosque in Greece in modern history, after the Turkish era 170 years ago. The minister affirmed the government's intent to fund the project with \$19 million over three years and to assign 4.2 hectares of land in the area of Fotanikoz, which is considered part of central Athens.

Based on previously stated reasons and situations relevant to Islamic and Arab communities' views regarding their presence in Greece, a center for Islamic

studies has not been established on Greek land. In 2001, the Islamic community took steps to remedy this by acquiring a license to establish the Arab-Greek Center for Culture and Civilization. The general assembly of the center held its first meeting in October 2002, when it chose seven members to sit on its board and three observers. It also defined the objectives of the center as follows:

- ▶ Cater to members of the Islamic community and keep them attached to the fundamentals of pure Islamic civilization
- ▶ Single out a number of members from the community and accord them the necessary training to enable them to explain Islamic civilization in a modern context
- ▶ Steer Muslims and their offspring away from corrupt Western lifestyles and inappropriate practices prevalent in Greece by providing appropriate alternatives
- ▶ Encourage social interaction among members of the Islamic society in Greece
- ▶ Debunk all allegations that 'enemies of Islam' often falsely propagate about Islamic civilization
- ▶ Disseminate Islamic culture by instilling in Muslims the true teachings of Islam
- ▶ Encourage dialogue among members of various civilizations
- ▶ Cater to new Muslims

In order to fully implement the stated objectives, the center undertook a number of activities such as teaching Greek and computer science, educating and raising children, organizing picnics, summer camps, Ramadan activities, sports and media activities, Quran recitations and Islamic jurisprudence. The center includes a place for prayers where lessons in Arabic and religion are given. It also supported the committee for Women and Child Care, which in 2004 dissociated from the center and formed the Greek Society for Aid and Care of the Child. Its main role is to provide financial, educational and healthcare for children.

Constraints of Collective Work

The facts previously outlined indicate that at all levels, Greece presents fertile opportunities for pro-Palestinian activities, solidarity with the legitimate rights of Palestinians and support for Arab and Islamic principles and issues. The need to navigate religious sensitivities entrenched in Greek sentiments, due to centuries of unjust Ottoman rule, is pressing. Both Arabs and Greeks were victims of this

historical era and it is important that these bitter memories be left behind. Religious sensitivities notwithstanding, Greece is a staunch supporter of Arab and Islamic rights and a genuine historic friend of Arabs, compared to other European countries. On the other hand, Arabs face serious constraints that inhibit their activities.

Of these are the following:

- ▶ Greece has always been viewed by Arabs as a gateway to Western Europe and not as a final destination. It did not occur to Arab students, businessmen and laborers that they might one day permanently settle in Greece and that a new generation would be born and brought up there. If this were the case, first-comers would have planned and better organized for future collective work. Only lately did immigrants awaken to the fact that, for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims and successive generations of fathers and sons, Greece has become their permanent home and many inherent social and religious concerns would need to be examined and resolved.
- ▶ Differences in relations with the host society: The dichotomy between full integration and separation from the host society has never been given enough thought. This may be due to differences in arrival times and economic and social standards as have been previously mentioned.
- ▶ The feeling of hopelessness and despair associated with inability to return to Palestine or any of the surrounding Arab countries due to persistence of conditions which led to immigration in the first place. Difficulties arose after September 11, 2001 in crossing from Greece into other Western European countries when more stringent anti-immigration measures and new EU policies were enforced.
- ▶ Sharp, even combative, differences and internal strife occurred between various Palestinian factions in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and continued into the new century. There were also conflicts within the Arab world between Arab and Muslim governments, governments and opposition within a country, or among various opposition groups in any given country.
- ▶ The prevalence of narrow personal interests over public interests and concerns albeit in varying degrees.
- ▶ The divisive trend that recently surfaced between Palestinians who remained in their country and Palestinians in the Diaspora, following the relocation of the PLO to the West Bank and Gaza during the mid-1990s and the birth of the Palestinian Authority.

► Strong Palestinian attachments to forge relations based along narrow family lines, occupations and businesses, or others from the same country of origin. Palestinians hailing from Syria built stronger relations with each other — or even with Syrians — than with Palestinians coming from Palestine. The same is true for those coming from Lebanon or Jordan. Other relations were based on ethnicity. Both ethnic and religious factors played a role in strengthening semi-official relations. Christian Orthodox Palestinians were bound by stronger relations, for example, than between them and Greeks belonging to the same sect, a fact which highlights the strength of the national dimension of those Palestinians.

► The Palestinian leadership paid no attention to the national role Palestinians in the Diaspora could play, especially those residing in Europe, and more specifically Greece, as its efforts were directed towards nation building inside Palestine during the second half of the 1990s. Repeated calls in recent years have echoed the desire to invigorate the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians, in the homeland and the Diaspora.

► The Arab, and to some extent the Islamic, official disclaimer of any serious commitment towards the Palestinian cause as regional tendencies grew stronger and became more entrenched in internal affairs.

► The nature of collective work and activities focused around events that raged within the Arab and Palestinian arenas. Collective work gained momentum after the outbreak of the second *Intifada*, on September 28, 2000, and then wound down. This event gave impetus to coordination with various Greek entities and led to the formation of solidarity committees which have since been dissolved. Thus, collective activity is considered to be of a spontaneous and temporary nature, far from being intuitively planned and creative.

► Lack of official Arab interest in Greece, especially from oil-rich Arab countries which refrained from setting up joint ventures or bank deposits in Greece, a matter that could strengthen Greece's stand in the EU and NATO. Instead they turned to western European countries which are inclined towards Israel and oppose legitimate Arab rights.

The Required Priorities

No collective work, be it Palestinian, Arab or Islamic can kick off without overcoming these constraints that are common, to varying degrees, not only to Greece but to all countries in the world where Palestinian, Arab or Muslim communities exist. Such constraints cannot be surmounted without concerted efforts of all those concerned, including but not restricted to the community, the Palestinian Authority, the official Arab policy, the Arab and Muslim opposition, the

host country etc. To assume otherwise is to propagate a policy based on 'say your words and move on', which will only reinforce the prevailing conditions and provide no solution.

It must also be realized that the world has become a global village which demands a wholesome approach to the problems and difficulties faced, as well as to the solutions and treatments that aim to connect the dots between issues of local, regional or international nature. Greece, for instance, is a member in the EU and in NATO, and this fact can't be overlooked.

The Palestinian responsibility towards developing a community effort in Greece should single out the following priorities:

- ▶ Propagate a national Palestinian discourse that will encompass all Palestinians and reflect common mutual denominators. This should supersede the narrow factional discourse which has become useless, ineffectual and does not serve any purpose especially when reaching out to others.
- ▶ Re-invigorate the PLO and its various entities. This will boost the role of communities in the Diaspora and help strengthen their postures.
- ▶ Attention and support must be balanced between communities abroad and the efforts of nation building. One should not be given precedence over the other.
- ▶ The role of all Palestinian entities, representative offices and embassies abroad should be clearly defined to avoid plurality in discourse and inter-factional arguments.
- ▶ Maintain a high level of coordination among Palestinian entities having similar activities in Europe
- ▶ The PLO should act as an umbrella for all Palestinian entities wherever they are found.
- ▶ Maintain a high level of coordination with official and popular European solidarity groups
- ▶ Secure effective coordination with Arab and Muslim frameworks, which would provide momentum to common issues and activities
- ▶ Empower the Palestinian diplomatic corps to converse with European governments and to genuinely address regional and territorial problems Palestinian communities encounter in Europe

► Design a master strategy to help Palestinians integrate smoothly into their host societies while preserving their Palestinian, Arab and Islamic identities

► Setup a higher Palestinian media board to oversee the establishment of active regional boards in Europe and Greece in particular. A unified language of dialogue with other media forums must be formulated.

Summary

Is Greece an Arab country???

Present day Greece is one of Europe's closest Arab friends, in general, and the Palestinian people, in particular, both on popular and official levels. Arab and Greek cultural and civilization interaction throughout history nourished the strong ties of friendship and neighborliness. Greece was never party to any anti-Arab colonial activity; like the Arabs, it was subjugated under Ottoman rule for almost four centuries (1453-1829).

During the modern era, various migrations between Greece and Palestine took place, especially during World War II, when Nazi forces occupied Greece in 1940, and thousands of Greek military and government employees were forced to take refuge in North Africa and parts of the eastern Mediterranean, living in camps that lasted until the defeat of the Nazis in 1945. At the end of the war many of these migrants preferred to stay and seek permanent residence, thus adding to and invigorating the Greek community in Palestine, until it became one of Europe's largest communities in the area. It was in the post-1948 era that parts of these communities were forced back to Greece by Israel and the chapter of compulsory, reverse migration of Palestinians towards the West, and Greece began.

Although Palestinian migration to Greece is a relatively recent phenomenon hardly any Greek city or island is absent of Palestinians. Major cities, however attracted more Palestinians than others because of their metropolitan nature such as the capital, Athens, which is a center where businesses, corporations government institutions and public service offices are concentrated. Salonika, the city with the second-largest population and famous for its university, was historically the greatest attraction for Palestinian students. The city of Patras has an additional concentration of Palestinian students, yet other groups of Palestinians are found in Crete, or on the remote island of Khios, or in the cities and villages of the Peloponnese, such as Kalamai.

The Palestinian embassy in Athens estimates the number of Palestinians in Greece to be around 3,000-3,500 persons. Embassy sources put the number of students at 500 men and women. Palestinian women, whose numbers are relatively low, live in Greece for reasons of study or work or because they married Greek men. Most of them, however, came to the country with their spouses who were seeking work. Many male Palestinian students married Greek

women, bore children and settled in the country as a result. The subject of intermarriage and its impact on the children has become an issue often debated among Palestinians in Greece.

Social disparities affected the patterns of migration and settlement in Greece. During their stay in the country, students, who are often deeply engrossed in politics, were able to forge a network of relations amongst themselves despite their political differences. This relationship was sometimes interrupted as students changed their residences for various reasons. Students were generally different from the rest of the Palestinians in that they married Greek women which enhanced their assimilation. Their fluency in Greek and that of their children, who were studying at Greek schools, and their mingling with the Greeks contributed further to their integration into society. They are, generally speaking, socially active and belong to the upper-middle class. Most of them work in the public sector and less so in the private sector. A few of them work for Arab companies and the most enjoy a steady income.

The experiences of businessmen and white-collar employees and laborers differ greatly from those of the students, blue-collar laborers and illegal immigrants. The relocation of whole companies, with their special statuses and preserved rights, to Greece had enriched the experiences of businessmen, white-collar employees and laborers. These companies provided their staff with all the social, technical and administrative services they needed, which limited their contact with Greek society and Greek institutions. Their interaction was confined to Lebanese and Jordanian Arab communities, the two countries they previously lived in and whose nationalities they carried. Many hold degrees in engineering, business administration or accounting, while their sons go to British, American, or other foreign schools where they study Arabic at school or take private Arabic lessons. As a result, they do not learn Greek but are fluent in English. The socio-economic status of members of these categories depends on their professional hierarchy in their companies; it is noted that most of them belong to the upper class of Palestinians in Greece.

Laborers who came as students but failed to go through college, or those who entered the country illegally in search of better social and economic conditions than in their homeland faced difficulty in finding suitable jobs and worked in the construction industry despite the fact that some of them had higher degrees. Because of their illegal entry, lack of official documents and scarcity of jobs in addition to their difficulties. In some cases, family connections helped them find better jobs and integrate more smoothly into society. Most members of these groups work for Greek employers and live in mixed neighborhoods comprising Greeks, Syrians, Lebanese or other minorities. Moreover, their relations with other members of the Palestinian community in Greece are limited. Their children study at Greek schools and as a result, master the language at an early age, in addition to speaking Arabic at home.

Greek-Palestinian relations survived many significant events including the changes in the Soviet Union and the death of Andreas Papandr ou in 1996. They suffered a slight downturn in the second half of the 1990s because of Greece's membership in NATO, which maintained an indifference towards the Middle East, and its membership in the European Union, which tried to limit immigration. Nevertheless, the incidents attributed to Palestinian students and the disinterest of the official Palestinian stand on Palestinians in the Diaspora after the birth of the Palestinian Authority, had only a marginal effect on these relations. PASOK preserved its active ties with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, as attested to by Chairman Arafat's attendance at PASOK's two conventions in 2000 and 2001.

Despite dwindling popular Greek support for recent political affairs, relations between Palestine and Greece remain friendly. These relations take many forms: pro-Palestinian demonstrations, fund-raising activities, song festivals and visits to the occupied territories by various solidarity groups, especially during Al Aqsa *Intifada*.

The increased illegal immigration to Greece, especially from North Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East, prompted the Greek government to regulate the status of immigrants, particularly in the 1980s, in an attempt to stem their flow. The scale of immigration had risen due to loose border control, which rendered Greece a gateway to the European continent, although most immigrants to Greece were Albanians or from Eastern European countries. For this purpose the Greek parliament ratified a law in 1991 that called for the control of illicit immigration and the law went into effect in June 1992. In July 1996, another law was issued with the objective of rectifying the conditions of illegal immigrants in Greece. One of the clauses in the new law calls for giving illegal immigrants in Greece legal and legitimate status in a two-stage process. The first stage calls for all such immigrants to register and get temporary legal permits, while permanent residence would be granted in the second stage. In January 1998 more than 373,000 persons out of an estimated 800,000 illegal residents registered. Although Greeks, in general, view the presence of immigrants with favor, the involvement of some immigrants in organized crime prompted some Greeks to view with suspicion, even hostility, specific groups of immigrants, especially Albanians who form the majority.

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change in government and opposition from locals and church officials saw to it that the proposal never materialized. While officials continue to make statements that support the building of a mosque, little has been done to actually bring this to reality. The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs 'has the right to give all the necessary permits for religious places of worship', said the ministry's press officer, Charidimos Caloudis. But the minister involved, declined to comment when asked to provide a time frame as to when the government would formally approve construction and what the cause of delay had been.

The previously stated facts indicate that Greece, on all levels, represents fertile soil for pro-Palestinian activities, solidarity with the legitimate rights of Palestinians and support for Arab and Islamic principles and issues. But the need to navigate religious sensitivities which are entrenched in Greek sentiments, due to centuries of unjust Ottoman rule, is pressing. Both Arabs and Greeks were victims of this historical era and it is important that it be kept with its bitter events in the past. Religious sensitivities notwithstanding, Greece is a staunch supporter of Arab and Islamic rights and a genuine historic friend of Arabs compared to other European countries. On the other hand, Arabs face serious constraints that inhibit their activities.

No collective work, be it Palestinian, Arabic or Islamic, can be initiated without overcoming these constraints that are common, to varying degrees, not only to Greece but to all countries in the world where Palestinian, Arab or Muslim communities exist. Such constraints cannot be surmounted without the concerted efforts of all those concerned, including but not restricted to the community, the Palestinian Authority, official Arab policy, the Arab and Muslim opposition, the host country etc.

It must also be realized that the world has become a global village. This demands a holistic approach to the problems and difficulties faced, as well as to the solutions and remedies that aim to solve issues of local, regional or international nature. Greece, as a member in the EU and in NATO, and as such must subscribe to concerns related with membership.

10,382
11,336 words/original

