

Greece / Michal Navoth

Operation Protective Edge

Operation Protective Edge (8 July 2014 – 26 August 2014) did not trigger violent events against Jewish targets and individuals. The initially strong anti-Israel manifestation, mainly expressed in the mass media, has gradually turned into antisemitism. Some articles of the Greek press blamed the Jews in Greece for not denouncing "the genocide of the Palestinian people". The widely circulated daily newspaper ELEFTHEROTYPIA wrote on 5 August 2014: "[t]he silence of the Greek Jews over the Palestinian genocide is loud [...] and those who are not silent, they speak of anti-Semitism that exists in Greece as well [...] So, if they consider us to be antisemites because we denounce their crimes and stand by the side of their innocent victims, well, then yes, we are!"¹

Other articles justified antisemitic events in Europe by that time as a punishment for the "Zionists' crimes." As for the Jewish community's reaction, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) was criticized for its announcement of 16 July 2014 on the situation in the Middle East. On 17 July 2014 the headline of the weekly newspaper ELEFTHEROS KOSMOS was: "220 dead in Gaza! Yet, KIS issued an announcement condemning the Palestinians!"² Several Greek 'journalists' did not hesitate to compare the Israelis to the Nazis and Gaza to Auschwitz. The same comparison was also the theme of a play improvised in front of the Holocaust Monument of Thessaloniki in 28 July 2014.

In addition to the mainstream press and the news broadcasts, antisemitic expressions were prevalent on the social media, which was used even by academia's people. A professor of the Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki posted an antisemitic comment on an on line academic dialogue platform reading "Gaza slaughter made by dirty soaps." A letter of protest was sent by KIS to the University Dean, who immediately responded condemning the event and promised to take a tough stance. In September 2014, the professor sent a letter of apologies which was posted on line by the university and was excluded from its on line dialogue platform.

There was a wave of anti-Israel protests in major Greek cities: Athens, where two separate demonstrations took place in 17 July 2014 in front of the Israeli Embassy, Thessaloniki, Volos and others. Banners described Israel as a "terrorist State" and called Israel to "stop the genocide of the Palestinian people". The demonstrations were organized by parties of the left, among them the left wing Syriza. On 22 July 2014 a demonstration in front of the EU premises in Athens was headed by Syriza's leader, Alexis Tsipras. Tsipras, who was sworn in as Greek prime minister in January 2015 was wearing the Palestinian scarf around his neck. While marching in Athens Tsipras said: "[s]eeing Israel killing children in Palestine is unacceptable. We should ... [express] our solidarity to the Palestinian people".³

¹ The Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece, *Memo*, 9 September 2014.

² *Id.*

³ *Analysis: The victory of Syriza in Greece is bad news for Israel*, THE JERUSALEMPOST, 26 JANUARY 2015, [HTTP://WWW.JPOST.COM/INTERNATIONAL/ANALYSIS-THE-VICTORY-OF-SYRIZA-IN-GREECE-IS-BAD-NEWS-FOR-ISRAEL-388960](http://www.jpost.com/INTERNATIONAL/ANALYSIS-THE-VICTORY-OF-SYRIZA-IN-GREECE-IS-BAD-NEWS-FOR-ISRAEL-388960)

Graffiti reading “Israel – USA, You have no excuse”, with the letter ‘S’ depicted as aswastika, was drawn on buildings in Athens, near the US Embassy in August 2014. The graffiti was obviated following the intervention of KIS with the Municipality of Athens.

The name of Golden Dawn, Greek extreme right wing political party and arguably Europe's strongest neo-Nazi party, was not mentioned in relation to the above events. This coincides with the pattern of antisemitism that characterized Europe in July-August 2014. In his recent article concerning the Gaza, Hamas and Antisemitism, Prof. Robert S. Wistrich expounded Palestinian demonstrations in Europe during Protective Edge that swiftly spilled over into crude antisemitism. He claimed: "[t]his has nothing to do with any traditional far-right or neo-Nazi agitation, which was conspicuous by its relative absence or low profile."⁴

Incidents of Vandalism, Abusive Behavior and Violent Assaults⁵

With the exception of the graffiti drawn in August 2014 such incidents did not parallel with the operation in Gaza. Throughout 2014 their number increased in comparison to the previous year and exceeded the number of incidents in 2012-2013 combined.

On 30 May 2014, the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki was vandalized. Damages were limited to a few broken plant vases and marble tomb decorations. Both the local Jewish Community KIS issued condemnation and protest announcements.

On 27 June 2014, vandals desecrated the Holocaust Monument in Athens using threatening and antisemitic graffiti. The police immediately arrived at the site and started investigation. Apart from Jewish reactions, condemnation statements were issued by the Deputy Prime Minister of Greece and Minister for Foreign Affairs and the General Secretary for Religions of the Ministry of Education.

On 1 September, 2014 six youngsters were apprehended after having entered the Jewish cemetery in Ioannina and before succeeding to cause any damage. Police filed a report and the Jewish Community's representatives were called in. No charges were made against the youngsters.

On 7 September, 2014 the façade of the surrounding wall of the Jewish cemetery of Larissa, next to its main gate, was desecrated with Swastikas and “Heil Hitler” graffiti.

On 20 October 2014 graffiti reading “Jews murderers” and “Smash the Jews” appeared on the road leading from the city of Volos to the hill of Goritsa. The local authorities immediately erased it.

On 30 October 2014 the Athens Holocaust Memorial was desecrated for the second time with the logo of an extreme nationalist and antisemitic organization known as the Unaligned Meander Nationalists (Greek abbreviation: AME). The Greek Government and the political parties issued announcements of strong condemnation of that act. AME, who describes the

⁴ Robert S. Wistrich, *Gaza, Hamas, and the Return of Antisemitism*, 8 ISR. J. OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 35, 42 (2014).

⁵ The Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece, *2014 Anti-Semitism in Greece*, December 2014.

Golden Dawn as “moderates”, vandalized the Holocaust Monument on the island of Rhodes in October 2012.

On 12 December 2014 assailants opened fire on the Israeli Embassy in Athens, but no injuries or damage were reported. A month and a half later a far-left Group of Popular Rebels claimed responsibility of the shooting.

On 23 December, 2014, the Jewish cemetery in Larissa was desecrated for the second time in 2014 with swastikas, threats such as “six million more”, and antisemitic phrases, like “Juden raus”, similar to those used by the Nazis to exterminate the Jews of Europe. The graffiti was signed by “Larissa Skins”. KIS and the Jewish Community of Larissa denounced the vandal act.

Greek MPs' attitude⁶

In an interview with Australia's “60 Minutes newsmagazine”, which aired on 10 April 2014, GD MP Ilias Panagiotaros praised Hitler saying he had a “great personality”, was prepared to do the dirty work and did what had to be done.

The Greek newspaper KATHIMERINI released in its Sunday edition of 21 September 2014 a video clip showing GD deputy leader Christos Pappas instructing two children how to give the Nazi salute and chant “Heil Hitler.”

GD MP Artemis Mathaiopoulos in his speech of 13 November 2014, during a session in the parliament accused the “Zionist lobby” and the “German loan sharks” of being responsible for the prosecution of his party.

In a TV interview on 15 December 2014 the leader of the right wing party “Independent Greeks”, Panos Kammenos, who was appointed the defense minister of Greece in January 2015, stated that the Greek Jews don't pay taxes. That comment was denied publicly by a government official, who called it “conspiracy theories, lies and slander.”⁷ KIS issued a statement in response, saying it “categorically refutes” Kammenos' remark.

Reaction of the Jewish Community and the Greek authorities

Whereas KIS' announcement on the situation in the Middle East of July 2014 was criticized in the mainstream press, in response to some of the other antisemitic events KIS' condemnation not only drew condemnation of Greek government, but also prompted an active response of the authorities in charge,

Golden Dawn

As part of the crackdown on the GD, which was launched on October 2013, an extensive investigation started in January 2014 and completed in September 2014. Having their parliamentary immunity lifted, all 16 GD MPS were charged of membership in a criminal organization, in addition to some other criminal charges. Also accused are around 50 party's members. Some of the members and MPs, including the party leader Nikos Michaloliakos,

⁶Ibid.

⁷ JTA, *Politician who said Jews don't pay tax appointed as Greece's defense chief*, HAARETZ, 29 January 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/1.639763>.

are behind bar awaiting trial, which is scheduled to begin on 20 April 2015. To be sure, the new antiracism bill under the general title “Fight against Xenophobia”, which was voted on 9 September 2014 by the Greek Parliament and include harsher penalties for inciting racial violence and Holocaust denial, can not be applied to the trial because it cannot be applied retroactively.

Despite the crackdown and the unprecedented parliamentary actions taken against the party, GD remains steadily the third largest party in the polls (the latest is of October 2014).

January 2015

Although the month of January 2015 was a most difficult one, no violent events occurred in Greece. Yet, January is noteworthy in respect to the general elections that took place in 25 January 2015 in that country. Syriza received 36.3% of the votes and Tsipras was able to form a coalition within 24 hours of the elections with a right wing party, the Independent Greeks that garnered 4.7% of the votes. Coming in second is the conservative New Democracy party of outgoing Prime Minister Antonis Samaras.⁸ Worse still is that jail fails to deter. GD came third in with 6.3 percent of the vote. That translated into 17 parliamentary seats. Thirteen of the lawmakers were re-elected among them the party's seniors, Michaloliakos, Pappas and the party spokesman Ilias Kasidiaris.⁹

It is too early to speak about the stability of the left-right coalition. Although the two parties share a common agenda to reject the imposed austerity measures, they are apart on most other issues. Even considering the taxes statement, the newly elected defense minister, who in his previous capacities favored close military cooperation. with Israel (which became closer in recent years), is still likely to be more pro-Israel than the Syriza lawmakers, Some of them participated in protests against Israel, with some even participating in the flotillas to Gaza in 2010.

The independent Greeks, like the GD, frequently blame outsiders for Greeks' economic woes, making them scapegoats for politicians. In that respect the two parties differ from Syriza. Moreover, Syriza emphasizes that it is a staunch critic of the neo-Nazi party, GD. If so, it is to be seen whether the new government will follow the hard line and governmental crackdown.

Syriza always takes pain to stress that they are not antisemitic, just "anti-Zionist". Such a statement should cause concern not only for Israel, but for the Jews in Greece as well. What has become evident is that the antisemitic events of summer 2014 blurred the distinction between State of Israel as a Jewish state and Jews as such.

⁸ Arye Mekel, *The New Greek Government: Israel has Reason for Concern*, BESA CENTER PERSPECTIVES PAPER No. 283 (2015).

⁹ Reuters, *Golden Dawn leader and MPs to stand trial, Greek court officials say*, THE GUARDIAN, 4 February, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/04/golden-dawn-leader-mps-trial-greek-court> ; *Judges' report on Golden Dawn case expected next week*, EKATHIMERINI.COM, 30 JANUARY 2015, http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_30/01/2015_546716.